

The Sumerians: History's First Recorded Civilization

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Introduction

When studying history, it is common that we look for historical firsts. The first time an event, idea, tradition or innovation comes up in the context of history is given special significance because it is that point at which we may say that it originated. This view of history is, perhaps, what makes the Sumerian civilization one of the most fascinating to study. Not only were the Sumerians responsible for many of the great “firsts” in known history, but they were also the first recorded civilization in history itself, leading historians and archaeologists to study them intensely as the best direct link we now have to the ways in which civilizations developed.

The reason for this distinction is not due to the Sumerians being the first group to organize themselves into complex social structures within the framework of what we would recognize as civilization. They were, however, the first people who recorded their own deeds, history, myths and day-to-day activities in a written language. For this

reason, Sumer can be viewed as the earliest civilization that we may learn about from its own records. In the study of other early civilizations, we are limited to what physical evidence can tell us. In the case of the Sumerians, however, we see the first instance in history in which the words and thoughts of man were recorded, allowing us a direct familiarity with the Sumerians that is much greater than anything that came before them.

The city-states of Sumer comprised the first great civilization of Mesopotamia, and their accomplishments, innovations and culture would eventually be adopted and built on by the likes of Assyria, Akkad and Babylon. Because of this, an understanding of the Sumerian civilization is key to understanding the other great powers that would rise in ancient Mesopotamia. Sumer acted as a forerunner to the rest of the history of the region, and helped to set the stage for the rise and development of the later empires of the region.

This work is intended as an introduction to the history of the Sumerian city-states and the people that ruled and resided within them. It will endeavor to cover the topic in a manner that is both informative and accessible. For this reason, it will take the form of a short history covering the subject in a broad manner, rather than focusing on the more specialized periods and subject areas that are explored more extensively in many academic works. The goal of this short history will be to leave the reader with a working understanding of the history and nature of the Sumerians and their world. It is hoped

that the reader will also come away with an appreciation of this remarkable example of modern civilization in its very earliest stages.

Section One

Southern Mesopotamia in Prehistory

Like all early civilizations, the Sumerians must be understood in the context of the region and environment from which they arose in order to be fully comprehended. The segment of the history of Mesopotamia just prior to the rise of the earliest Sumerian city-states is known as the Ubaid period, so named because of early excavations done at the site known as Tel al-Ubaid west of the remains of Ur. This period is generally thought to have started sometime around 6200 BCE, and continued up until Ubaid culture was completely replaced by the civilization of the Uruk period in around 3800 BCE.



Illustration 1: A piece of pottery typical of the Ubaid period of Mesopotamian history. Such pieces are often used to differentiate Ubaid-era sites from those of the later Uruk period.

The Ubaid period, though it is correctly designated as prehistoric, was anything but primitive by the standards of its time. During this period, we begin to see the development of many of the most basic components of large-scale civilization in the region that would later become Sumer. Evidence of agriculture and regular animal domestication, as well as a marked development from small villages to

more urban settlements, begin to appear during this period. Agriculture had been prevalent farther to the north long before the remains of the Ubaid culture begin to display it. Two leading theories have gained weight in academic circles regarding this. The first is that the southern region of the modern day country of Iraq was simply uninhabited before the Ubaid period. The second is that remains of agriculture and more developed civilization prior to this period have not survived because of the shifting of the coast in southern Iraq and because of the silt in the deltas of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Whatever the case may be, we can be sure that by the time of the Ubaid period, agriculture and animal domestication were a regular part of life in southern Mesopotamia.

Other developments also characterize this prehistoric period. The increasingly large settlements, which surely would have required basic administration, combined with a disparity in the items left in the graves of different individuals, has led scholars to conclude that the Ubaid period was marked by the gradual development of social stratification, creating a class of rulers that would likely have evolved from basic tribal leaders. These prehistoric rulers would have been the forerunners to the kings that characterize later periods in Mesopotamian history. This is an important development, as it made the continued growth of increasingly large urban areas possible. Without a degree of central administration and planning, the earliest cities in the region would not have been able to function as cohesive social units.

Collectively, these developments led to the growth of cities into the very earliest of the later Sumerian city states. The oldest of these that has so far been discovered is the city of Eridu, the southernmost site of the early cities. Founded sometime around 5300 BCE, Eridu has long been a candidate for the title of the world's oldest city. The site, like the other early cities, appears to have risen up around a temple. In later centuries when the Sumerian civilization was at its height, Eridu would come to be identified as the city sacred to the god Enki. The original Ubaid temple, therefore, was likely dedicated to some earlier version of this god. The temple, called *e-abzu*, or house of the aquifer, appears to have its earliest roots in the Ubaid period, though later Sumerian kings would add on to or repair it, and a ziggurat would eventually be built atop its remains. As we see in the literature that is available from later periods after the development of cuneiform writing, the Sumerians regarded Eridu as a city of great import and as the original seat of the mythological early kingship. In this and many other instances, we see that sites that began their development during the Ubaid period would continue into recorded Sumerian history.

In its earliest days, Eridu is thought to have been a port city that arose due to the habitation of 3 different cultural groups at the site. It is important to note that the site would have been a coastal settlement when it was founded, as the shoreline of the Persian Gulf has moved substantially southward in the several millennia since the founding of Eridu. The groups that were originally present at the site seem to have

been the people of the Ubaid culture themselves, semi-nomadic herding groups of Semitic origin and early fishing groups from the Arabian peninsula. These diverse groups likely came together at what was then the mouth of the Euphrates river because of the abundant natural resources that the area had to offer, starting a permanent settlement that would eventually become one of the very first cities in the world.

Another site, more prominent yet than Eridu, that was first founded during the Ubaid period was the city of Ur. This city, which would eventually become a central hub of Sumer, is thought to have been founded sometime around 3800 BCE, toward the very end of the Ubaid period. While the early habitation of the city is neither as extensive nor as prominent as Eridu, there is little doubt that it too was originally an Ubaid settlement.

This discussion of the Ubaid period and the people that characterized it leaves us with an interesting question: at what point did the Sumerians themselves arrive in southern Mesopotamia? The sudden appearance of a very different class system, more advanced architecture and a higher degree of overall social organization beginning around 4000 BCE suggests that the Sumerians were migrants, rather than the indigenous people of the Ubaid culture. Some have pointed to a land named Dilmun, written about in several surviving mythological texts, as the possible homeland of the Sumerians. Dilmun has never been positively identified, though it is

widely theorized to have been a part of the Arabian peninsula, possibly somewhere in the vicinity of modern-day Kuwait. Another theory is that the island of Bahrain may have been the land of Dilmun. While these and other theories each have their own merits, no definitive archaeological evidence has been found that would connect the Sumerian civilization with any of these locations or positively identify the land of Dilmun.

Another less frequently suggested place of origin for the people who became the Sumerians was a place called Aratta, which played a significant role in the legend of two early and possibly mythical rulers of Uruk named Lugalbanda and Enmerkar. Much like Dilmun, the location of Aratta has not been identified, and some scholars have even gone so far as to suggest that the land itself was probably a myth rather than a reflection of a real place. Others, however, have suggested that it was a real place, probably somewhere in modern-day Iran, to the north and east of the region that would become Sumer.

Making the explanation of the origin of the Sumerians still harder is the fact that their language does not bear any known relation to any other recorded linguistic system. In many instances, linguistics pairs itself with archaeology in such matters to determine the true identity of an ancient ethnic group (a prominent example being that of the Hittite civilization, which was originally thought to be a Semitic group until linguists successfully demonstrated that the Hittite language was, in fact, Indo-European in origin). Because Sumerian is a language

isolate, however, such an attempt to determine their origin through the roots of their language has not been possible.

One thing that is essential to understand about the chronology of prehistoric Mesopotamia is the dating of the Ubaid period. The dates thus far given put the end of this period in around 3800 BCE. There is, however, a degree of overlap depending on the site in question. 3800 BCE can be said to mark the end of the Ubaid period overall, for it is in around this time that we see a full transition to the Uruk period that eventually succeeded the Ubaid era. This dating, however, does not take into account the fact that archaeological findings characteristic of the Uruk period go back to around 4100-4000 BCE at their earliest points. Naturally, the earliest traces of what historians today characterize as the culture of the Uruk period are found in the ancient city-state of Uruk itself, known to the Sumerians as *Unug* (Uruk being the name that was used by the later Akkadian civilization for the city).

The Uruk period, though certainly distinct, did not fall abruptly upon the end of the Ubaid period. Rather, we can see some degree of continuity between the two, as the more advanced civilization of the Uruk period spread and the urbanization that had begun during the Ubaid era continued as a trend. During the early Uruk period, generally dated between about 4100 BCE and 3500 BCE, we also see the beginnings of specialized crafting on a mass scale in southern Mesopotamia. One example of this transition is in the pottery that

characterizes the two periods. Pottery of the Ubaid period was often made and painted by hand. During the Uruk period, we begin to see a more utilitarian production of vessels that were almost certainly made using pottery molds, allowing for a higher production rate. These vessels, known as beveled rim bowls for the general shaping of their rims, are thought to be the earliest example of mass production in the history of the world. These bowls, which usually have a depth of around 4 inches and a diameter of roughly 7 inches, are thought to have been used to issue standard measures of grain as payment for laborers. This kind of transition to the more specialized crafting class that would have been needed to produce the bowls, as well as more developed methods of producing wares, are indicative of the general advancement that archaeological evidence shows in the Uruk period as cities were continuing to expand in both size and population.

The Uruk period is, of course, tightly linked to the development of Uruk itself, as this is the traditional type site for the evaluation of the culture of the Uruk period. Archaeologically speaking, the city of Uruk is described in 18 layers of strata, with each layer attributed to a different period of development. Layers 16-18 of the site (keeping in mind that the assigned numbers begin with 1 as the closest to the surface and therefore newest level) are attributed to the Ubaid period, during which Uruk was founded. In layers 4-15, archaeologists find the remains of the Uruk period itself. It is during this time that the city became the greatest power in prehistoric Mesopotamia. It is also toward the end of this period that the word “prehistoric” begins to

lose its place in the story of the Sumerians, as it was the late Uruk period that spawned the proto-literate version of the world's first writing system: cuneiform.



Illustration 2: A singularly well-preserved example of early cuneiform script. This sample dates from the Early Dynastic Period, but still shows some of the less abstract characteristic of Uruk Period writing.

Cuneiform began to develop as a system of pictorial representations of concepts sometime around 3500 BCE. This type of entirely pictographic representation eventually gave way to a more refined cuneiform script that could convey more complex ideas. Between its

inception in about the middle of the Uruk period and the end of the same, cuneiform developed from its early pictorial stage into the more readily recognizable wedge-shaped script that we today normally think of as standard cuneiform, though it would continue to be refined into more abstract forms as time went on. The script was written by pressing a stylus made from a reed into a wet clay surface, thus making a mark upon it. It is because of this long-lasting clay medium that modern historians have been able to learn so much about the ancient Sumerians, who otherwise would almost certainly have remained enigmatic.

By the end of the Uruk period, cuneiform script had developed into a rudimentary written language that would gradually evolve to become the conveyor of ideas for most of the ancient Near East. Later centuries would see it develop still further to adapt itself to languages other than Sumerian, as well as to convey more of the grammar and structure of the Sumerian language itself. During the Uruk period, however, the pictographic nature of the symbols is insufficient to determine what language the writers were speaking (though Sumerian is certainly the most probable suspect). Eventually, it would be used to write the Akkadian language (of which Babylonian and Assyrian were dialects), as well as Hurrian, Elamite and even Hittite. The early development of written language is, by far, the greatest contribution that the Uruk period made to the development of civilization. Without this critical component, it is highly doubtful that the incredible achievements of the following periods of Sumerian history would have

been possible.

Section Two

The Jemdet Nasr Period

The late Uruk period seems to come to a close in around 3100 BCE. By this time, Uruk had become the prototype for the city-state model of centralized government that would come to define Sumerian history. However, in between the Uruk period and the classical dynastic periods that are usually thought of as the main historical period of Sumerian civilization, there was a span of roughly two to three centuries of further development known as the Jemdet Nasr period.

Much like the transition from the Ubaid to Uruk periods, the changing of the Uruk period into the Jemdet Nasr period is not marked by a sudden shift, but rather by gradual changes that displayed much continuity with existing trends of increasing population, more irrigation-based agriculture and the continued growth of cities. By the time of the Jemdet Nasr period, we may be certain that the Sumerians themselves had become the dominant force

in the region, as it is at the beginning of this period when the first cuneiform tablets appear that are definitively written in linguistically recognizable Sumerian.

Like the other two periods thus far discussed, the Jemdet Nasr period takes the name of its most prominent archaeological type site. The site called Jemdet Nasr is located in east-central Iraq and consists of two major mounds. Remains of an administrative building containing an archive of early cuneiform tablets have been the central focus of most excavations, but the two mounds, with a total area of nearly 24 acres combined, have yielded much information about the continued development of southern Mesopotamia in the protohistoric era before the beginning of the Sumerian dynastic periods.

The Jemdet Nasr period is also when archaeologists begin to see widespread use of cylinder and stamp seals, which would remain in use through most of the history of ancient Mesopotamia. Cylinder seals had been invented during the Uruk period, but would become more common as writing spread into more regular use during the Jemdet Nasr period. Both seals and the impressions that were made with them on early cuneiform tablets have been found at the Jemdet Nasr site. Because they acted as a form of administrative signature that could identify tablets from the same source, seal impressions have become a critical component in the study of ancient Mesopotamia.

One of the seal impressions that has been found on multiple tablets

at the site lists the name of four of the cities that would become prominent city-states during the dynastic periods and would remain vital hubs through the remainder of Sumerian history. These cities were Ur, Uruk, Larsa and Nippur. From this, we may surmise that the basic political structure from which the Sumerian civilization would spring was already mostly in place by the end of the Jemdet Nasr period.

Although a critical period of continuing transition and development for Sumer, the Jemdet Nasr period was rather brief, lasting only from about 3100 BCE to sometime around 2900 BCE. Though short, the period was crucial for the history of Sumer, as its advances ushered in what would become the dynastic period of Sumerian history. From the end of the Jemdet Nasr period on forward, the history of Sumer becomes much more clear, as written sources begin to become more widely available. At the end of this period, we see the transition to fully formed Sumerian civilization in what is known as the Early Dynastic period.

Section Three

The Early Dynastic Period

With the Early Dynastic period, beginning in about 2900 BCE, archaeologists begin to see the remains of truly Sumerian civilization. It is, then, in this period that we may truly say that the history of Sumer begins. There is, however, a certain problem in establishing the historicity of much of this early dynastic period. The *Sumerian King List*, one of the most important cuneiform documents ever discovered, has been used to establish the basic dynastic patterns and in what cities these dynasties existed. The list, although seemingly accurate in describing kings of later periods, contains a degree of historical inaccuracy that should be noted before any information from it is presented. This is the fact that it often gives regnal lengths that are many times longer than possible.



Illustration 3: A columnar copy of the Sumerian King List, the document in which many of the names of the Sumerian kings have been found.

The most obviously erroneous dates are from the earliest part of the king list. This portion, which describes rulers from a period before a great flood that is described in Sumerian myth, is almost certainly mythological in nature itself. In it, some kings are said to live and rule

for tens of thousands of years. This problem, however, does not stop with the early dynastic period. The regnal lengths begin to become shorter, but still remain in the hundreds of years quite regularly. Even in much later dynasties when the majority of the dates are reasonable given a possible human lifespan, there will still occur accounts of kings who ruled for more than a century. Given the obviously mythological nature of much of this information, it is necessary to understand that the dynasties that are described in the Early Dynastic period of Sumerian history may or may not be historically accurate before a certain point.

It is also important to understand the general structure of the Sumerian city-states and how these dynasties held power over them. While warfare among the city-states would become common, actual military conquests of the region of Sumer as a whole would not begin to occur until much later in the Early Dynastic period. Instead, the earliest dynasties are thought to have held hegemony in Sumer at the dictates of the priesthood in the city-state of Nippur. Nippur was never the seat of power itself, but did act in conferring power onto other dynasties because of its status as the great holy city of Sumer. The Kings List makes frequent reference to the defeat of one dynasty before the kingship was moved to another city, beginning a new dynasty. From this, we may conclude that the priests at Nippur likely shifted their support in response to political and military realities, but the endorsement of Nippur would have been vital to kings who wished to gain overall control of the city-states in the earliest years of

dynastic Sumer. In many instances, later kings are recorded to have also offered lavish gifts to the temples of Nippur, a practice that was most likely in place in the earliest years of the Early Dynastic Period. In this way, Sumerian kings who wished to establish regional hegemony could gain the favor of Nippur through economic means, rather than by military conquest.



Illustration 4: The remains of one of the temples of Nippur, the sacred city that was often courted by Sumerian kings in order to legitimize a claim of regional hegemony.

The first dynasty that the *Sumerian King List* records is that of the city of Kish, a city that appears to have been a late comer to the settlements of Sumer, having dated from the early Jemdet Nasr period rather than the Ubaid. Archaeological evidence has yet to directly confirm any of the kings of this early period, but it is known that Kish was a major power in the region at the time. According to the king list, the first king of Kish was named Jushur. Following Jushur's reign,

which the list places at 1,200 years, a figure by the name of Kullassina-bel is said to have taken the kingship in Kish. Kullassina-bel, however, can be translated from the Akkadian language, which even at this early stage of Sumerian history was fairly common within the otherwise Sumerian-speaking population, as “all of them were lord.” Some scholars have suggested that this name, then, is not the name of a king, but instead a description of a period during which there was no central authority with hegemony over the various city-states of Sumer. According to the King's List, Kullassina-bel ruled for 960 years, a figure that does not fit the chronology, even if we accept that this is a period rather than the rule of a single king.

Following the Kullassina-bel period, the *Sumerian King List* gives the names of seven kings about whom nothing of any substance may be said. It is likely that some or possibly all of these kings were mythological in nature, and as before, their reigns are each exaggerated to multiple centuries in the list. These kings, as listed in order, were Nangishlishma, En-tarah-ana, Babum, Puannum, Kalibum, Kalumum and Zuqaqip. Following these kings were a group of three further kings, of whom just as little is known and who may also be mythical in nature. At least one more piece of information may be found about these kings in the list itself, as these three are specifically designated as being of the same hereditary lineage. While it is likely that the first dynastic rulers of Kish all would have been members of a hereditary monarchy, this group of three kings is the first reference that the Sumerian Kings List itself makes to the passage of kingship

from fathers to sons. The first of these kings, named Atab, was succeeded by his son Mashda, who was in turn said to have been succeeded by his own son, Arwium.

Following Arwium, we see the first example of a king whose name is mentioned in texts outside of the king list itself, Etana. Although Etana may still be a mythological figure, the finding of a name outside of the list is a stepping stone toward the more well-documented regnal periods that would eventually begin to develop. The other mentions of Etana are in a mythological tale found in both Babylonian and Assyrian sources. This myth (slightly different in each version) tells of Etana wishing to have a son. Etana is eventually taken to the heavens by an eagle who, in the longer version of the myth, is grateful to the king for saving it from a pit into which it had been thrown by a serpent. Upon his ascension to heaven, Etana is said to have found a magical plant, referred to as the plant of birth. This plant allows him to sire his son, who both the myths and the *Sumerian King List* give as Balih.

Following Balih, the list records a king by the name of Enmenuna, to whom it does not attribute any relation to Balih. Enmenuna, however, is said to have been the first of 5 kings of a single hereditary line. These kings, Melem-Kish (Enmenuna's son), Barsal-nuna, Zamug and Tizqar, were each the son of their immediate predecessor. As before, no other references to these kings appear outside of the list itself, and the list gives no details about them aside from their genealogy. The

same is true of the two kings that follow, named Ilku and Iltasadum. These kings are not recorded to have been of Enmenuna's line, nor are they specifically stated to have borne any relation to each other.

Iltasadum, however, may be said to have significance in one very important manner. It is with him that the section of the king list which may be mostly or entirely mythological ends. At this point in the king list, the regnal lengths of the rulers are still measured at many times the possible lifespan of a human being (a trend that continues for some time before it eventually disappears from the recorded king list). With the exception of Etana, however, the king list up to this point has yet to yield the name of any ruler recorded elsewhere, and even Etana is mentioned only in myth and is not corroborated by archaeological findings, though it is entirely possible that these myths were based on the life of a real king in the earliest days of Sumer. With Iltasadum's successor, however, we draw near to the end of the First Dynasty of Kish, and into a period where the kings recorded in the *Sumerian King List* begin to reflect historical figures we may be sure actually existed.

This successor to Iltasadum (if, indeed, Iltasadum himself was a figure from real history, rather than purely mythological) was named Enmebaragesi. This king, the first Sumerian king of whom we have something close to specific knowledge, is said in the list to have captured the kingdom of Elam, in what is today southwestern Iran. In an inscription known as the *Tummal Chronicle*, which dates from a

much later period of Sumerian history during the reign of the king Ishbi-Erra, Enmebaragesi is also said to have been the first king to have built a great temple to the god Enlil in the city of Nippur. As previously discussed, the power of Nippur came largely from being the central city of worship for this god, and the control of the city and the priesthood therein played an important role in the power structure of ancient Sumer. If, then, Enmebaragesi was the king who first constructed the temple of Enlil in Nippur, he becomes a singularly important figure in the history of the Early Dyastic Period. Some credence is given to the *Tummal Chronicle* by the archaeological evidence for the existence of this king. Of the four contemporary inscriptions that have been found bearing the name of Enmebaragesi, two of these have been found on vase fragments in the city of Nippur itself.

While it is with Enmebaragesi that the history of the Sumerian city-states begins to become more clear, his reign and its chronology within the *Sumerian King List* also raise certain historical problems. Enmebaragesi and his son and successor, Aga of Kish, are both mentioned in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, by far the most famous piece of ancient Sumerian literature. According to the epic poem, Enmebaragesi is captured by the immediate predecessor of Gilgamesh, named Dumuzid. Both Gilgamesh and Dumuzid, as well as two other kings prior to Dumuzid, are listed in the king list as members of the First Dynasty of Uruk. Aga, the son of Enmebaragesi, is listed as the final king of the First Dynasty of Kish and is mentioned as having laid

siege to Uruk in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, making the two kings rough contemporaries. While of these kings, only Enmebaragesi has been confirmed by objective archaeological evidence, his existence is frequently offered as circumstantial proof that his son Aga and Gilgamesh himself were probably historical figures, rather than purely mythological.

If this is so, it becomes more historically likely that the *Sumerian King List* is incorrect in stating that the kingship was taken from Kish to Uruk after the reign of Aga, after which three more kings followed before the rule of Dumuzid. One theory that explains this discrepancy is that a transitional period occurred during which a general shift of overall power in the region took place from Kish to Uruk. In this case, the three kings of Uruk that precede Dumuzid would either have been contemporaries of earlier kings of Kish, or would have been purely mythological in nature.

The first of these three kings of Uruk, by the name of Mesh-ki-ang-gasher, is known only from the king list itself. The list, however, does give more detail about him than about previous rulers. Mesh-ki-ang-gasher was said to have been the son of Utu, the Sumerian sun god. He is said to have ruled at E-ana, the Sumerian name for the temple of Inanna at Uruk. This name is used in the king list to describe Uruk in its earliest years, prior to Mesh-ki-ang-gasher's son, Enmerkar. Mesh-ki-ang-gasher is recorded by the *Sumerian King List* to have “entered the sea and disappeared” (though some translations substitute “and

ascended the mountains”, possibly just indicating wide travels of this king, rather than a disappearance into the ocean).

Following Mesh-ki-ang-gasher was his son, Enmerkar. If Enmerkar was a historical figure, something which has yet to have been established by archaeological evidence, his deeds are certainly mythological. In the various legends that surround him, he is said to have founded Uruk and been the inventor of writing, two events that we know date back much farther than the Early Dynastic Period. He is also said to have made an attempt to reunite the various regions around Sumer under a single language, owing to the confusion of the many languages that were spoken in the different regions. This has been suggested by some scholars as an early precursor to the Tower of Babel myth that would eventually find its way into biblical texts. It is in the legends surrounding Enmerkar that Aratta (one of the possible original homelands of the Sumerians) is first mentioned in Sumerian mythology.

Succeeding Enmerkar was another king whose deeds were certainly mythological, named Lugalbanda. Lugalbanda is said to have been a commander in the army of Enmerkar, and the *Sumerian Kin List* puts him after Enmerkar in the royal line of the First Dynasty of Uruk. In some versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Lugalbanda is given as the name of the father of Gilgamesh. Lugalbanda is recorded in other myths to have been the human consort of the goddess Ninsun, who is said in the epic poem to have been the mother of Gilgamesh,

accounting for his semi-divine lineage. In some divine lists, Lugalbanda's name appears as a low-ranked god. In some versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself, Lugalbanda is referred to as divine in his own right. If Lugalbanda was, in fact, a real king of Uruk, it would appear that he had been heavily deified as his legacy turned into mythology.

Following the period of rule of Dumuzid, who is said to have followed Lugalbanda, we at last come to Gilgamesh, by far the most well-known of the Sumerian kings. The world's first known epic poem, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, documents this king's deeds and adventures, some likely based in real history and others certainly mythological. The poem covers Gilgamesh presiding over the building of the walls of Uruk, his friendship with another great hero named Enkidu, their adventures to slay the demon Humbaba and later the Bull of Heaven, sent by the goddess Inanna to take vengeance on Gilgamesh for refusing her advances toward him. After the death of his friend Enkidu, Gilgamesh begins to contemplate his own mortality, fearful of death. Seeking out Utnapishtim, a survivor of the mythical deluge that had overtaken the world before the First Dynasty of Kish and an immortal blessed by the god Enlil, Gilgamesh endeavors to learn the secret of eternal life. Utnapishtim eventually reveals that eternal life can be gotten from a plant that grows on the bottom of the ocean. Gilgamesh retrieves the plant, only to have it stolen from him by a snake as he is bathing. In the epic, Gilgamesh ultimately fails to obtain immortality and returns to Uruk. In another mythological account that

is not part of the traditional *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is said that he was buried underneath the Euphrates river, which the residents of Uruk diverted in order to cover his resting place after he had died.

Stepping away from the mythology that surrounds Gilgamesh, it is widely thought by scholars of Sumerian history that he was, in fact, a real king of Uruk. The fact that he was more or less contemporary with Aga, the son of a king that we may be sure existed, makes it more likely that he was a figure from real history, though of course it is clear that he was deified and written into a complex mythology later on. Some deeds, such as building the city walls of Uruk, on the other hand, are likely to have been real events. The historical Gilgamesh is thought to have lived and reigned sometime around 2500-2600 BCE, toward the end of the historical period during which Kish would have been the predominant power in the region. In 2003, a German archaeological team conducting a magnetic survey of the city of Uruk reported finding the footprint of a former building that would have, at one time, been placed in the middle of the Euphrates river bed. Comparisons to the description of the final resting place of Gilgamesh led members of the team to speculate that the structure may have been the tomb described in the ancient accounts.

Ignoring the obviously mythological nature of many of the kings of the First Dynasty of Kish and the early First Dynasty of Uruk, we see a broad description of the balance of power in Sumer and how it shifted from about 2900 BCE to about 2600 BCE. The sheer number of kings,

as well as their obviously exaggerated regnal lengths and limited written sources that are contemporary to this period, makes it difficult to nail down specific events that occurred under specific kings. However, we can see the general pattern of power between the city-states, as well as descriptions of the lands and peoples that surrounded Sumer reflected in many of the mythological accounts that are attributed to these early kings.

Following the reign of Gilgamesh, the *Sumerian King List* shows two more kings of the same hereditary line. These were the son and grandson of Gilgamesh, named Ur-Nungal and Udul-kalama, respectively. Following these two kings are five more names that are, as before the era of Enmebaragesi, Aga and Gilgamesh, not found beyond the kings list itself. These kings are La-ba'shum, En-nun-tarah-ana, Mesh-he, Melem-ana and Lugalkitun. Following Lugalkitun, the *Sumerian King List* states that Uruk was defeated, and that the kingship of Sumer was taken to Ur.

However, we once again see the *Sumerian King List* attempting to create a linear chronology out of events that were more likely contemporaneous. It was long thought, based on the list itself, that the kingship had been moved to Ur following a defeat of the kings of Uruk. This conception of the dynastic shift changed, however, when another version of the *Tummal Chronicle* offered up a very different view, presenting Mesannepada, the first king of the First Dynasty of Ur, as yet another king that preceded Gilgamesh by stating that he

and indeed even his son Mes-ki-ang-nuna had constructed and kept up temples in Nippur before Gilgamesh and his son would take charge of them. Mesannepada's name has been found on inscriptions bearing the epithet "king of Kish," which some historians have offered up as evidence that it was in fact the royal house of Ur, rather than of Uruk, that originally ended the dominance of Kish under Aga, and that that dominance was shortly taken from Ur by the power of Uruk.

Looking at the comparison between the *Sumerian King List* and the other pieces of evidence, we begin to see two very different stories regarding the development of kingship in early Sumer. The first, as suggested by the king list, shows clear and clean transitions between both rulers and dynasties, with regional hegemony shifting abruptly and remaining with one dynasty before eventually being once again shifted completely to another. The other, which is more borne out by the texts that we find outside of the king list, seems to suggest a more politically realistic environment in the earliest periods of historic Sumer. In this secondary version, we see a general struggle for overall dominance between three cities, those of Kish, Uruk and Ur, all major powers at the time. Because the *Sumerian King List* already displays a high degree of inaccuracy and information that is inspired by myth, it is almost certain that this latter version is the more accurate, even though precise chronologies cannot be established with regards to the shifting of power and the relation of the regnal periods of the kings of these three cities.

The *Sumerian King List* begins the First Dynasty of Ur with the king Mesannepada. However, we know from inscriptions found on seals at the royal cemetery of Ur, that he was not the first prominent king in the city of Ur. At least two other kings are thought to have preceded Mesannepada, stretching back (in theory, at least) into the earlier time during which Kish would have been the dominant force in the region and when Enmerkar and Lugalbanda may have been the kings of Uruk, if they were indeed historical figures. The first of these kings was Meskalamdug, who was quite possibly the father and predecessor of Mesannepada. An inscription on a lapis lazuli bead from Syria refers to Meskalamdug as the father of Mesannepada, but there is some dispute about whether or not this is so, as this is the only reference that is made to any relation between the two. Another king, Akalamdug, is also known to have reigned in Ur. Both of these kings are thought to have ruled prior to Mesannepada, but this is not certain. These kings are known from seals found during the excavations conducted by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley at the Royal Cemetery of Ur in 1924, and neither appears on the *Sumerian King List* itself.

The rules of Mesannepada and his son Mesh-ki-ang-Nuna are not well-documented beyond the kings list and the *Tummal Chronicle*. It should be noted, however, that during the First Dynasty of Ur, we begin to see the *Sumerian King List* begin to reflect regnal lengths that are consistently in a possible range. While the trend would revert to overly long recorded periods of rule during the Second Dynasty of

Kish, it is at least an indication that this was a period of decreasing mythology in the list. Mesannepada was said to have reigned for 80 years (a period that is certainly long, but not impossible if he had come to the throne as a child), with Mesh-ki-ang-Nuna ruling for the entirely reasonable period of 36 years.

Following Mesh-ki-ang-Nuna, Elulu is said to have come to power in Ur. The *Sumerian King List* is silent as to what, if any, relation Elulu had to the previous royal family. Though Elulu's reign, much like his predecessors, is sparsely documented, we do know that he either restored or expanded the temple of Enki at Eridu during his rule. He was followed by Balulu, whose relation to either the previous royal family or to Elulu is not known, after a 25 year reign. Balulu returns to the formerly common trend of being a king known only from the *Sumerian King List*. Assuming that the list accurately portrays the ending of the First Dynasty of Ur, however, Balulu holds the distinction of being the last ruler of that dynasty. After Balulu's 36 year reign, the list states that Ur was defeated, and that rule over the Sumerian city-states was then claimed by Awan, one of the earliest dynasties of the non-Sumerian Elamites of modern Iran.

Awan is known to have been a major power in the Near East nearly as early as the development of the Sumerian city-states themselves. During the early years of Sumer, the Awan dynasty is thought to have acted as a regional rival. Enmebaragesi, during the First Dynasty of Kish, is said to have defeated Elam. This account, if there is any

historical fact behind it at all, would show that the Sumerians and the Elamites were already in conflict for control of the region by the time of the earliest recorded king of the Kish dynasty. According to the king list, three kings of Awan exercised control over Sumer for a period of 356 years (though, as has mentioned before, the dating of the Sumerian Kings List should be taken as somewhat less than absolutely reliable). The names of these Elamite kings have not survived.

There is no independent confirmation for the rule of Awan over Sumer, although the reference may simply show a period during which the kings of Awan were competing for regional dominance with the Sumerian city-states. If this period of rule by Awan did occur, it is generally thought that it must have been more or less confined to the 25th century BCE, owing to the chronological constraints of other dynasties and events. After this period, the king list states that Awan was defeated, and that the kingship reverted again to the city of Kish.

During the Second Dynasty of Kish, we once again see a reversion to the semi-mythological figures in the *Sumerian King List*. Again, the names of the kings given by the list itself during this period, with one exception, cannot be verified by objective archaeological findings, and the regnal periods revert to being listed as multiple centuries in length. This does not mean, however, that this period of the history of Kish is entirely enigmatic. At least one relatively well-documented king can be traced to sometime fairly close to the Second Dynasty of

Kish. This king, Mesilim, is recorded in several historical documents as a king with some degree of regional power over the cities of Lagash and Adab from his seat of power in Kish. He is supposed to have established a clear border between the rival states of Umma and Lagash after a dispute over irrigation rights. Given this obvious influence in the region, it is likely that Mesilim had gained some degree of hegemony over Sumer itself, and therefore may have been one of the kings of the historic Second Dynasty of Kish.

The names recorded in the Sumerian Kings List in this dynasty are Susuda, Dadasig, Mamagal, Kalbum, Tuge, Mennuna, Enbi-Ishtar and Lugalngu. Enbi-Ishtar's name has been found in one account discussing his defeat at the hands of a future king of Uruk. Whether or not the remainder of these kings existed is a question in which little if any evidence exists for either possible position. Following this line of kings, the list states that Kish was defeated once more, and that the control of Sumer was taken by Hamazi, a city-state that has yet to be positively identified. It is generally thought that Hamazi was somewhere north of Sumer, possibly in the region of the Zagros mountains. As with the Awan dynasty, little can be said of this period. Hamazi is mentioned frequently enough in Sumerian historical records that it is clear that the state had a certain degree of power in the region at this time, but there is no archaeological evidence that suggests any kind of shift in power away from Sumer during this time frame. The *Sumerian King List* gives the length of the dynasty in Hamazi as 360 years, under a king by the name of Hadanish. As with

other early entries to it, however, the time frame listed here must be ignored, both for exaggerating the possible length that a single king could rule and for completely disrupting the chronology with such a long and unaccounted-for period of outside rule.

Following the defeat of Hamazi, most likely sometime in the 25th century BCE, regional control of Sumer is said to have returned to Uruk, beginning the period known as the Second Dynasty of Uruk under a king named Enshakushanna. This ruler of Uruk serves as an early prototype for the Sumerian empires that would later be constructed by Eannatum (Enshakushanna's immediate successor as the main power in the region), Lugalzagesi and the Akkadian king Sargon. Aside from Hamazi, Enshakushanna is credited with subjugating Akkad and Nippur, as well as the city-state of Kish. Interestingly enough, Enshakushanna may be another example of mistaken chronology on the part of the kings list, as at least one account records him having defeated Enbi-Ishtar, one of the kings of the Second Dynasty of Kish, presumably during his conquest of that state. Further complicating the matter of chronological accuracy during this period, some have speculated that the father of Enshakushanna may have been Elulu, one of the kings of the First Dynasty of Ur prior to the supposed Awan dynasty and the Second Dynasty of Kish. Here again, we see that power in ancient Sumer was likely much more fluid than the linear chronology portrayed in the *Sumerian King List* would indicate.

Following Enshakushanna, we see a point of complete divergence between the *Sumerian King List* and the evidence that history and archaeology have provided to us. The king list indicates that Enshakushanna was followed in the kingship by his son, Lugal-ure. While it is very likely, given later references, that Lugal-ure did succeed his father as the ruler of Uruk, the overall control of the region seems, at this point, to have gone to the king of Lagash, a city which is never mentioned in the king list. This king, by the name of Eannatum, would go on to form one of the earliest true empires of the ancient world.

Eannatum was not the first ruler of the city-state of Lagash. The city's first dynasty had begun with his grandfather, Ur-Nanshe and continued to his father Akurgal before passing to him. During the reign of these two kings, Lagash had grown powerful enough to rival Ur, Uruk and Kish, which had likely been weakened by the centuries of struggle for control of Sumer. When Eannatum came to the throne, he began to execute a plan to conquer all of Sumer, thus creating the first model for later empires that would unite all of the city-states under a single ruler. He is recorded to have conquered Umma (the ancient rival city of Lagash), Nippur, Kish, Uruk, Ur, Larsa and Akshak, a somewhat enigmatic city-state whose location has yet to be definitively identified. With the conquest of these cities, his rule over Sumer would have been nearly complete.

Eannatum, however, did not content himself with dominion over

Sumer. His armies also conquered lands farther afield, including parts of the Elamite kingdom, Mari, and a land called Subartu, a region of northern Mesopotamia mentioned several times in the records of various kingdoms prior to the Bronze Age Collapse and which may have been a name referring to early Assyria. These conquests would have given Eannatum a general hegemony over most of Mesopotamia.

Eannatum would eventually be succeeded by his own brother, Eannatum I, under whom the empire built by his brother would begin to crumble. Soon, Umma, the principle rival of Lagash, would revolt and become autonomous once again. Eannatum I would ultimately sire the next king of the First Dynasty of Lagash, Entemena. Under Entemena, Lagash would once again flourish, and reassert its control over the state of Umma. In this conquest, he was assisted by Lugal-ure, by then the ruler of the city of Uruk, which returns us to the chronology of the *Sumerian King List* once more, though Lagash would continue on as a highly important city-state for much of the rest of Sumerian history.

Following Lugal-ure in Uruk was a king by the name of Argandea, who the kings list states ruled for only 7 years. Following the rule of this king, Uruk is said to have been once again defeated by Ur, beginning the Second Dynasty of Ur. The first two kings of this dynasty, Nanni and his son, Mesh-ki-ang-Nanna II, are both known from the *Tummal Chronicle* as having been instrumental in the upkeep of the temple at Nippur, thus verifying their historicity as kings who

would have had substantial influence in both Ur and Nippur, and who therefore would likely have exercised hegemony over the region of Sumer. A third king of the Second Dynasty of Ur, whose name has not survived on existing copies of the king list, is said to have reigned for only 2 years before Ur was defeated and power shifted to the city-state of Adab.

The Dynasty of Adab appears to have had only one king, a conqueror and empire-builder by the name of Lugal-Anne-Mundu. This king, perhaps building on the earlier example of Eannatum of Lagash, once again united the Sumerian city-states under one rule, and then began to expand his conquests outward into the other lands of Mesopotamia. Much like this predecessor from Lagash, Lugal-Anne-Mundu would subjugate parts of Elam and Subartu, eventually pushing his empire into the Amorite lands and even modern-day Lebanon. The exact date for the height of this empire is not known, though it is thought to have been sometime in the 25th century BCE. The empire, however, would not survive its creator. When Lugal-Anne-Mundu died, the internal tensions inherent in any empire with such great diversity tore it apart, leading hegemony of Sumer to once again fall to an outside power, that of the Semitic kingdom of Mari.

According to the kings list, 6 kings from Mari held dominance over Sumer during this dynasty. These kings were Anbu, Anba, Bazi, Zizi, Limer and Sharrumiter. As with other entries in the *Sumerian King List*, we must take parts of the chronology in stride, assuming that this is a

description of a Semitic kingship that was probably contemporaneous with other dynasties that are mentioned in the list. It is said that after the rule of Sharrumiter, Kish once again become the seat of hegemonic power. The Third Dynasty of Kish is a fascinating anomaly in the history of Sumer, as its one and only “king”, Kug-Bau, was in fact a woman.

Kug-Bau is recorded to have been an alewife, or a woman who brewed beer or ale, prior to becoming the queen of Kish. The *Weidner Chronicle*, a much later document from Mesopotamian history, attributes her rise to sovereignty to divine intervention. The facts of her rise to power are, however, not currently known. Following her rule, the *Sumerian King List* states that the rule of Sumer shifted to the city-state of Akshak. However, it is known that Puzur-Nirah, the third king of the dynasty of Akshak, was a rough contemporary of Kug-Bau, and that her son, Puzur-Suen, was the first name recorded in the Fourth Dynasty of Kish, which follows the supposed rule in Akshak. This makes it almost certain that the Third and Fourth Dynasties of Kish were, in fact, a single dynasty, and that it and the Akshak Dynasty developed alongside each other, rather than in a linear chronological time frame.

The first three kings of the Akshak Dynasty, Unzi, Undalulu and Urur, were almost certainly kings who ruled before the time of Kug-Bau's sovereignty over Kish. The next name on this list, Puzur-Nirah, is known from the *Weidner Chronicle* to have been the king of Akshak

when Kug-Bau came to power in Kish, putting the two of them within the same time frame. Following Puzur-Nirah on the list are Ishu-il and his son, Shusuen, after which the kingship returns to Kish during the reign of Kug-Bau's son, Puzur-Suen. From this account and the knowledge that Kug-Bau and Puzur-Nirah would have ruled at roughly the same time, it is quite easy to deduce that these two dynasties evolved side by side, with Akshak probably emerging first during the reigns of the three kings that precede Puzur-Nirah. A resurgent Kish under Kug-Bau and her son, then, seems to have surpassed Akshak in power, returning the kingship to Kish for what is referred to more commonly as the Fourth Dynasty of Kish. Even though the third and fourth Kish periods are almost certainly one and the same, we will here, for the sake of convenience, continue to refer to the period beginning with Puzur-Suen as the Fourth Dynasty of Kish.

Following his reign, Puzur-Suen would be followed by his son, Ur-Zababa, whose court would spawn the most influential figure in the history of Sumer. According to most accounts, Ur-Zababa of Kish was the king to whom a man named Sargon, later the first ruler of the Akkadian empire, was a cup-bearer. Before the famous empire-builder would find himself in control of Mesopotamia, however, another great power would rise, this time from Umma. While the *Sumerian King List* shows several kings of Kish in between Ur-Zababa and the rise of Sargon, it is almost certain that these kings were subservient to Sargon himself, rather than reigning in between the two. The last king of the Early Dynastic Period, therefore, was Lugalzagesi.

Between the time of Entemena's restoration of Lagash and the time of the rule of Ur-Zababa in Kish, the city of Lagash appears to have been ruled by a series of priest-kings who were ineffective and often corrupt. Sometime in the 24th century BCE, however, a king named Urukagina came to power in Lagash with the intent of again restoring the city to its former power. Instituting what may have been the world's first systematic legal code, Urukagina reformed Lagash and appeared to have a promising future kingship ahead of him. However, Lugalzagesi, a king from the ancient rival state of Umma, overthrew Urukagina in or about the seventh year of his (Urukagina's) reign. While at least one inscription seems to suggest that Urukagina probably survived the taking of his city, it does not appear that he ever regained control of Lagash.

Around this same time, Lugalzagesi also conquered Kish, where Ur-Zababa had ruled, as well as the states of Nippur, Larsa and Ur. During his conquest of Sumer, Lugalzagesi also conquered Uruk, which he made the capital of his new Sumerian empire. Thus began what is referred to as the Third Dynasty of Uruk, of which Lugalzagesi was the only king. An inscription pieced together from fragments refers to the empire of Lugalzagesi as having extended from “the Lower Sea along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers,” referring to the Persian Gulf, to “the Upper Sea,” or the Mediterranean.

Lugalzagesi would enjoy a period of some 20 years of dominion over

Mesopotamia, representing the final years of the Early Dynastic Period of Sumerian history. His reign would come to be one of the defining historic features of this period, as it was one of the few that was well-documented. The Early Dynastic Period, though often sparse in historical records that can be viewed as empirically reliable, had set the stage for the rest of Sumerian history. In it, the idea of political hegemony as granted by control of the holy city at Nippur had been established, and the city-states that would ultimately be the great powers of Sumer until its final days had come into full stages of development.

This period is also important from a historical perspective because of the increasing frequency of proper historical records as it progressed. From about 2900 BCE until about 2600 BCE, few reliable records can be found to confirm the historicity of the people and events that are often described in mythological texts. As the Early Dynastic Period went on, however, the recording of events and the deeds of historical kings became more and more common, and writing in general would enter more widespread usage than it had enjoyed in the earliest days of this period. While still sparse because of the sheer remoteness of the era, historical records in the last days of the Early Dynastic Period and into the Akkadian period of Sumerian history become vastly more common than they had been in the days of the earliest dynasties.

From what little may be definitively said of the Early Dynastic Period, it is fairly clear that it was a period of competition and rivalry

between the many city-states for control of Sumer. It is also clear that the dynasties described in the *Sumerian King List* were overlapping and interconnected historically, rather than following one upon the other in the very ordered fashion that the list describes. Understanding of this power dynamic is important, as it was this kind of internal power struggle that would make establishing and keeping control of empires consisting of the various city-states so difficult in later periods as well.

We can also say that by the time that the Early Dynastic Period ended, Sumerian civilization was fully formed. Distinctly Sumerian features, including fully developed cuneiform script, ziggurat temples, specialized artisanal classes and even scribe schools can be seen in full force by the end of this period. Sumer had also grown to trade and exercise diplomatic relations with other neighboring regions, something which likely spurred the eventual growth of empires in the later days of the Early Dynastic Period. It is in this period that we may say classical Sumerian civilization grew and flourished.

Section Four

The Akkadian Period



Illustration 5: A bronze head of an Akkadian king, most likely Sargon of Akkad, the founder of the Akkadian empire.

The rise of Sargon in Kish sometime in or around 2334 BCE is an uncertain matter, as it is unclear whether or not he personally deposed Ur-Zababa, who may have been made a vassal king under Lugalzagesi, or whether another vassal was imposed by the king of Uruk and then overthrown by Sargon. Sargon's massive

successes and long reign would eventually lead to a mythological story being built up around him, which was compiled into a piece of literature fittingly known as the *Legend of Sargon*. In the legend, it is stated that at one point prior to his becoming a king, Sargon was sent by Ur-Zababa to Lugalzagesi in Uruk, with secret instructions for Lugalzagesi to execute him upon his arrival. While certainly apocryphal, this account may indicate that Ur-Zababa continued on as ruler of Kish under Lugalzagesi before being overthrown by Sargon.

While the manner in which Sargon ascended to the kingship of Kish may be somewhat enigmatic, his deeds after doing so are recorded with a precision far surpassing any of the other rulers that we have thus far discussed. It appears that once he had become the king of Kish and the commander of its armies, he made an ambitious plan to attack Lugalzagesi's own capital, Uruk. Despite the military might of Lugalzagesi, the forces that Sargon had gathered managed to attack the city, apparently defeating its defenders to such a degree that they were forced to abandon the city in an attempt to regroup and fight him elsewhere. After having captured Uruk, Sargon is reported to have ordered the demolition of the walls of Uruk, supposed to have been built under the supervision of Gilgamesh himself, in a show of military strength.

The forces of Lugalzagesi, though deprived of their strong defensive position at Uruk, are recorded to have gathered what allies they could for an open battle against the new king of Kish. Surviving inscriptions

record that as many as fifty *ensis*, or governors of the city-states under the king, may have joined the former defending force from Uruk. Despite this large number of provincial allies, the forces that had already been defeated at Uruk failed to best Sargon's forces in the field, losing a second time. With these defeats, the position of Lugalzagesi was severely weakened, but he himself had not yet been defeated.

When Sargon's forces attacked Uruk, Lugalzagesi and the main body of his army appear to have been away on a campaign, an event around which the timing of Sargon's attack was almost certainly based as a military expedient. Attacking and taking Uruk while the then-king was too far away to prevent the attack would have greatly increased Sargon's chances for victory at Uruk and diminished Lugalzagesi's power upon his return. Lugalzagesi and his army are recorded to have returned to Sumer at some point following the pitched battle that Sargon and his forces had fought with the coalition of Uruk's former defenders and Lugalzagesi's loyal allies in the region. The two kings engaged in yet another battle, this time with Lugalzagesi's main military force put into the field against the armies of Kish. For a third time in as many battles, Sargon emerged victorious, apparently routing the entire army of Lugalzagesi.

The fate of the former king of Umma and later of Uruk remains somewhat uncertain. One account states that after their final battle, Sargon's forces captured him and he was dragged to the temple of

Enlil at Nippur chained and collared, but even this account does not record what happened to him after that. Whatever the case may be, it is certain that Lugalzagesi disappears from the historical record following his defeat at the hands of Sargon. His empire was destroyed, and the Akkadian empire was well on its way to being formed.

Lugalzagesi's defeat, however, did not deliver control over Sumer into the hands of Sargon. While the taking of Uruk gave him a degree of regional hegemony, he would still have to fight former allies of Lugalzagesi in southern Mesopotamia. Of his further conquests, Ur and Umma, the latter of which was the home city of Lugalzagesi and therefore ill-disposed toward annexation into Sargon's growing empire, would be the most critical. Fighting his way southward and eastward from Uruk, his armies would eventually come to control all of the land from Kish in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south, where Sargon is recorded to have washed his weapons upon his arrival there, forming a new empire of all of the Sumerian city-states. This, however, would be only the beginning of the expansion of Sargon's empire.

Sargon and his army would go on to fight in as many as 34 recorded battles, pushing the boundaries of the Akkadian empire far to the northwest. Once again, the land recorded in Sumerian chronicles as the "Cedar Forest", or modern-day Lebanon, was added to a Mesopotamian empire. Farther north, the Syrian city-state of Ebla appears to have been among the conquests of Sargon as his armies

pushed toward the Taurus Mountains. The Amorites, Hurrians and Elamites also lost territory to Sargon. One inscription recounts the size of Sargon's army at 5,400, though it is impossible to determine at what point in his career this number would have been accurate.

Beyond what is known of his empire, some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that Sargon invaded parts of Egypt and even India. While it is known that trade with these regions did occur during the time of Sargon, and while he is even recorded to have sent trading expeditions to a region thought to be India, there is little evidence to suggest that his empire ever incorporated either Egypt or western India. One text that mentions the armies of Sargon crossing the Mediterranean Sea and arriving in a land to the west, however, does at least indicate the possibility that Sargon's forces may have ventured so far as the island of Crete.

At some point following his conquests, Sargon is said to have established the city-state of Akkad somewhere near Kish, but this account presents many historical dilemmas. Firstly, the Akkadians and the Sumerians, while deeply interconnected in history, are thought not to have been of the same ethnic group. Had Sargon simply established a new city to be inhabited by a homogeneous population, there would be no such difference. The former problem is also borne out by the existence of the Akkadian language, which is distinct from that of the Sumerians. As previously discussed, Sumerian is a language isolate. Akkadian, however, is neither a language isolate nor in any way

known to be related to Sumerian. The Akkadian language is, in fact, the earliest known of the Semitic group, part of the wider Afroasiatic language family. Again, had Sargon simply founded a new city, a new language, let alone a language completely unrelated to that spoken in Sargon's original military base in Kish, would not be explained.

The best explanation that has been put forth from the historical community to explain this is that Sargon, an ethnically Semitic Akkadian in his own right, restored, rather than built, the city of Akkad (more properly called Agade, if translated accurately from the ancient texts), which already dominated a Semitic region referred to by the same name. This accounts for the distinct Semitic nature of the Akkadians, their distinct language and the fact that Akkad is mentioned in at least one text dating back to the time of Enshakushanna of Uruk some 200 years or more before the time of Sargon. Unfortunately, as the ruins of Akkad have never been identified, there is no hard archaeological evidence that may be used to confirm either version of the events.

Sargon's reign is recorded in the *Sumerian King List* as having lasted for 56 years. Although we have previously ignored the dates of the list, there are two reasons to believe that this regnal period may not be altogether inaccurate. The first reason is that by this time in Sumerian history, the kings list is no longer interspersed with reigns that are dated at ridiculous lengths. The second is that accounts from the time of Sargon indicate that he put down a series of revolts that

occurred when he was in his old age, meaning that his time on the throne likely was quite long. Given these two facts, it is not unreasonable to think that the 56 years of rule by Sargon of Akkad recorded in the *Sumerian King List* is a more or less accurate time frame.

At some point during his reign, one inscription makes a passing mention to his restoration of the city of Kish, presumably necessary because of the damage done to it when Lugalzagesi had conquered it. The middle period of Sargon's rule following his great conquests was a period of prosperity and growth for most of the Sumerian city-states, with many civil projects being undertaken in order to make the empire both more powerful and more cohesive.

Sargon's later years, as already mentioned, would see revolts from many of the lands under his control. According to the surviving accounts, however, Sargon's forces were still sufficiently powerful to defeat the enemies who had risen against him. Some accounts, though of a Babylonian origin, record an attack on Akkad itself which Sargon and his army successfully thwarted. Following is a rough translation of part of this account:

“...and all the lands revolted against me and besieged me in Agade (Akkad), but the old lion still had teeth and claws. I went forth to battle and defeated them. I knocked them over and destroyed their vast army. Any king who wants to call himself my equal, where I went, let him go.”

It should be noted that by the time this account was written, Sargon had acquired a semi-mythical status derived from his incredible successes in both military and civil matters. However, most scholars believe that the account of the revolts is likely accurate, as it corresponds well with other accounts regarding the troubles of the empire toward the end of its builder and great king.

Sargon is thought to have died sometime in or around 2279 BCE. During his lifetime, the famous Akkadian conqueror had changed the dynamic of the political world that had surrounded and created him. Over the coming centuries, his legacy would grow into legend. Despite the fact that Sumer would be a distant memory and the city of Akkad itself long since vanished into history by this time, the Assyrians would keep legends of the great ruler alive until the end of their empire around 600 BCE, speaking to the profound influence that he had had well over 1500 years earlier.

Perhaps Sargon's most lasting legacy was the fact that he seems to have understood, more than any other king before him, the meaning of history. Unlike the kings who preceded him in the Early Dynastic Period, Sargon ensured that records of his conquests and of his deeds were kept, providing modern historians with the remarkably clear picture we have today of this figure from remote antiquity. The same records that allow us to know so much about Sargon himself are also instrumental in giving us a picture of the entire Mesopotamian region

at the time of his rule.

Upon his death in what is almost certain to have been extreme old age for his time, Sargon left behind two sons, named Rimush and Manishtushu, to continue the lineage of the Akkadian empire. Both are thought to have been sons of Sargon by his only known wife, a woman by the name of Tashlultum. When Sargon died, Rimush became the king of Akkad and the ruler of the Akkadian empire. By this time, however, the empire had fragmented. Though Sargon had put down the revolts that had occurred during his reign, the city-states and other regions that had been subjugated were still not quieted, and the death of Sargon may well have incited yet more revolutions, as it may have been seen as a chance to defeat Akkad before Rimush could establish himself.

During his own reign, which lasted only nine years, Rimush is known to have put down rebellions in most of the lands that had originally been incorporated into the Akkadian empire by his father. Ur, Lagash, Umma and Elam are some of the regions in which we know Rimush campaigned in his attempt to hold the Akkadian empire together. What became of Rimush is unknown, but after the 9th year of his reign, his brother, Manishtushu, seems to have taken control of Akkad. Surviving accounts of his roughly 15 year reign indicate that he administered the empire in much the same way his father had, both in terms of sending campaigns into far-flung lands (though these have yet to be identified, other than that they had to be reached by sea

from the Persian Gulf) and in terms of keeping an orderly and well-run domestic empire.

One of the most important artifacts related to Manishtushu is a roughly 4.5 foot tall (though broken at the top) diorite stele called the Manishtushu obelisk, due to its shape. The obelisk is a record of various land grants that Manishtushu had purchased in order to distribute to the officers of his army, somewhere in the vicinity of Kish. These grants appear to have been divided into four different districts or estates, with one side of the obelisk-shaped stele dedicated to the dispensation of each of these four.

Sometime in or around 2254 BCE, rule of the Akkadian empire passed once more from Manishtushu to his own son, Naram-sin, under whose rule the empire would reach its greatest height before beginning to collapse from the internal strife characteristic of the other Sumerian empires that we have thus far discussed.

Naram-sin's earlier years seem to have been a time of great growth and prosperity for the Akkadian empire, paralleling the period during which Sargon himself had ruled from Akkad. Naram-sin is known to have defeated the Lullubi, a loose coalition of tribal groups in the region of the Zagros Mountains, an event which was commemorated in a now well-known stele. He is also recorded to have conquered the land of Magan, which most historians identify with modern-day Oman and to have launched further campaigns against the Elamites. At

home, he was responsible for the construction or restoration of temples in Akkad, as well as in the holy city of Nippur.



Illustration 6: Victory stele of Naram Sin, showing the Akkadian king triumphant over his enemies.

However, the tide would eventually turn against the Akkadians. The events that led to the fall of the Akkadian empire are recounted in a text that is known as *The Curse of Akkad*. This text attributes the fall of the Akkadian empire to the will and intervention of the gods (making it at least partly mythological), but it does offer some insight into the likely historical events that led to the decline of Akkad.

According to *The Curse of Akkad*, the fall of the empire was punishment for Naram-sin's sack of the Ekur, the most sacred building of Enlil in the city of Nippur, laying both it and the city to waste and

carrying its treasures back to Akkad. While there is no evidence for this part of the tale, it is likely a literary addition made when *The Curse of Akkad* was written some centuries later to give explanation to the other events that the story conveys. Enraged by the attack of his own temple, the god Enlil is said to have called the Gutians, a nomadic people of the Zagros Mountains, down to attack the Akkadian empire. The invasion, according to this account, was accompanied by natural disasters and famine, which further weakened the empire.

In order to placate Enlil, eight of the other deities of Sumer, according to the legendary version of the events, decided to destroy Akkad itself as an offering to Enlil. Following is a brief excerpt from *The Curse of Akkad* describing the aftermath of the destruction of the city:

“...on its canal boat towpaths and landings, no human being walks because of the wild goats, snakes and mountain scorpions. The plains where grew the fine grass now grew nothing but the reeds of sorrow. Instead of its sweet flowing water, there flowed bitter water. Who said “I will dwell in that city” found not a good dwelling place.”

The curse suggests that Akkad was abandoned over time, and that it eventually fell into disrepair. However, other records suggest that it

was during the reign of later Akkadian kings, not Naram-sin, that the end of the empire would come to pass. After the end of his rule sometime around 2218 BCE, Naram-sin was succeeded by his son Shar-Kali-Sharri, who the *Sumerian King List* records to have ruled for a full 25 years, certainly indicating that the Akkadian empire did not suddenly collapse after the reign of Naram-sin. Records from the reign of Shar-Kali-Sharri are not as frequent as those regarding his father or certainly his great-grandfather, Sargon. What records do survive, however, indicate a militarily strong Akkadian empire during his reign that continued with its long campaigns against the kingdoms of Elam. Combat with the Gutians, who would later overrun and rule Sumer, is also seen in the records from the reign of Shar-Kali-Sharri, possibly indicating that the conflict between the two had already begun to escalate during the period of his rule.

Following Shar-Kali-Sharri, the king list records that four kings, named in order as Igigi, Imi, Nanum and Illulu, ruled for a combined period of only three years. It seems to be during this period that the rapid collapse of the Akkadian empire founded by Sargon and upheld by his various descendants occurred, rather than during the reign of Naram-sin as *The Curse of Akkad* would suggest. It is likely that these four kings, rather than ruling successively, were in fact all contenders for the throne. The period of struggle for rule of what was left of the Akkadian empire appears to have been ended when Dudu became the king of Akkad.

Little is known of Dudu's reign, except that by the time he took power, it is likely that rebellions in the various states of Sumer and the invading armies of the Gutians had probably already deprived the empire of most of its land holdings. The *Sumerian King List* records his reign as a period of 21 years, a number that may or may not be accurate, given the volatility of the period over which he presided. Nevertheless, Dudu was not the last king of Akkad. That distinction would be held by his son, Shu-turul. Shu-turul's reign is known to have occurred from various archaeological finds that seem to attest his existence. By the time of his kingship, however, the empire seems to have been reduced to controlling little more than Akkad itself, Kish and the more minor city-state of Eshnunna.

At the end of Shu-turul's reign, the king list once again interprets likely concurrent events in a linear fashion, recording that the kingship reverted to Uruk from Akkad before finally being completely overtaken by the invading Gutians. The list states that five kings ruled in Uruk in between the end of Shu-turul's reign and the beginning of the Gutian occupation. The more likely version of events, however, is that Uruk became autonomous of the Akkadian empire in the latter's final days and that the kings of the Fourth Dynasty of Uruk were those that ruled the city when Akkad was in control of the region and then took control of southern Mesopotamia after the Akkadian empire became too weak to exert power over the region. The kings mentioned in the list for this period are Ur-ningin, Ur-gigir, Kuda, Puzur-ili and Ur-Utu. The combined rule of these kings is said to have been 30

years.

The end of the Akkadian dynasty and the Fourth Dynasty of Uruk were likely also concurrent, with both being overtaken by the Gutian invaders from the mountains. The Akkadian empire, however, would have long-lasting impacts on the region. Linguistically, Akkadian and dialects thereof would become the *lingua franca* of Mesopotamia for much of the rest of its ancient history. The empire's founder, Sargon of Akkad, would also continue to play a prominent role in the myths and literature of the region until the end of the Assyrian empire well over one thousand years later. Sargon's dynasty would also become the model for other empire-builders in the region who would go on to build on the Akkadian king's legacy.

Section Five

Sumer Under the Gutians and the Second Dynasty of Lagash

Unlike the Sumerians, who left much of their culture and history behind for modern scholars to study, the Gutians are a relatively enigmatic group, thought to be nomads from the central Zagros

mountain range. As such, the Gutians were poorly equipped to exert control over large territories with centralized administration, as the Sumerians had now been doing for nearly a millennium. Their rule, which is thought to have lasted only about one century, is therefore viewed as a temporary dark age of Sumerian history, sharply contrasted to the great prosperity and power of the Akkadian empire that had preceded them.

Precisely when the Gutians came to dominate Sumer and overrun the remains of the Akkadian empire is unknown. According to the king list, the first three years of their rule were not presided over by a single king or ruler, but instead “they were their own kings.”

Generally, the Gutians are thought to have gained control over Sumer by staging raiding attacks, rather than engaging in pitched battles. It is therefore possible that the king list account is a reflection of many different Gutian raiding parties that acted independently, rather than as a unified force. Sometime around 2135 BCE, however, this dynamic would change, when the Gutian king Inkishush is thought to have come to power.

Records from the Gutian period of Sumer are singularly poor and sparse, and little is known about the exact events that occurred during this time period. Part of the problem comes with the fact that the Gutians do not seem to have adopted Sumer's greatest potential asset, written language. As such, there are no surviving records from the Gutians themselves that can attest to the events of their rule, and their

own language has long since been lost. The Gutian kings listed in the Sumerian King List following Inkishush are Zarlagab, Sarlagab, Shulmi, Silulumesh, Inimbakesh, Igeshaush, Iarlagab, Ibate, Yarla, Kurum, Apilkim, Lerabum, Irarum, Ibranium, Hablum, Puzur-Suen, Iargalanda, one penultimate king whose name has not survived, and Tirigan.

These kings, in total, are said to have reigned for 91 years and 40 days, with Tirigan's kingship lasting for only 40 days before being defeated by the king of Uruk. Of them, very few are known to have existed from archaeological evidence. This century of rule, however, does not seem to have been absolute, as there was at least one city-state which remained independent and at which an entirely Sumerian dynasty remained intact.

The Gutian period is roughly contemporary with the Second Dynasty of Lagash. Much like the first (and, indeed, Lagash in general), this dynasty was never attested to in the Sumerian King List. Despite this, records from Lagash give modern historians a relatively clear picture of the dynastic succession of the kings of Lagash during this otherwise poorly documented period of the history of Sumer.

The history of the Second Dynasty of Lagash truly begins with a king named Puzur-mama, a contemporary of the Akkadian king Shar-Kali-Sharri who seized control of Lagash as the Akkadian empire was beginning to collapse. While many kings followed and upheld order

during the period when the Gutians were systematically gaining control over the rest of Sumer, the Second Dynasty of Lagash would undoubtedly reach its zenith under a king by the name of Gudea.

Gudea is thought to have ascended to the throne of Lagash sometime in or about 2144 BCE, shortly before the onset of the Gutian period in the rest of Sumer. As the rest of southern Mesopotamia fell into the dark age brought on by the Gutians, Gudea would restore Lagash to the glory that it had experienced during its first dynasty.

During his reign, Gudea would advance Lagash in many important ways. Inscriptions that have survived indicate that the city-state, during this time period, achieved a great deal of military power in the region, defeating the state of Anshan south of Elam and gaining at least some degree of control over the city of Ur. This military power was augmented by a massive trade network that allowed Lagash to obtain resources from many areas of the ancient Near East that almost certainly would not have been available to the Gutian-controlled regions of Sumer.

At home, Gudea instituted a series of legal reforms dealing with debts and property ownership that would certainly have stimulated the early economic systems of Lagash. He also oversaw the construction of many infrastructure projects, including many new irrigation canals in and around Lagash. During this period, the arts were also expanded in his territory, a fact attested to by the many

statues, 26 in all to date, that have been found personally depicting Gudea.



Illustration 7: A carved statue of Gudea, king of Lagash

Gudea is thought to have reigned in Lagash for 20 years before having been succeeded by his son, Ur-Ningirsu, who continued many of the policies that had been established by his father. Ur-Ningirsu would rule until around 2119 BCE, when his own son, Ugme, would assume the throne. The remaining two kings of this dynasty would rule for only a few years apiece. The final king of the Second Dynasty of Lagash is recorded to have been Nammahani, the grandson of a pre-Gudean ruler of Lagash named Kaku, who ruled until the end of the dynasty at the hands of Ur-Nammu of Ur in about 2110 BCE.

While the *Sumerian King List* records nothing of this entirely Sumerian dynasty in Lagash, it does record another dynasty that almost certainly arose as a result of a rebellion against the Gutians. This was the single-ruler Fifth Dynasty of Uruk under a king named Utu-hengal. With the exception of the dynasty of Gudea in Lagash, the Gutian period seems to have been disastrous for Sumer, prompting a rising against the Gutian king Tirigan. This presumed, though not definitively attested, rebellion in Uruk would be the beginning of what is commonly known as the Sumerian Renaissance or Sumerian Restoration, the final period of Sumerian history before its eventual collapse.

Utu-hengal's forces, according to at least one tablet inscription, captured Tigiran during a retreat to the Gutian lands after his defeat and brought him to Utu-hengal, presumably in his capital at Uruk (though the tablet does not specify this). Following is a section of the passage:

The envoy of Utu-hengal took Tigiran and his family prisoner in Dubrum, placed stocks of wood upon his hands and blindfolded him. He was then brought before Utu-hengal, threw himself at his feet, and he set his foot upon his neck...thus returned the kingship to Sumer.

Utu-hengal assumed kingship over all of Sumer after defeating and ousting the Gutians, restoring the region to autonomous Sumerian rule

centralized in Uruk. His reign lasted for seven years, which doubtlessly would have overlapped with the rules of the last kings of the Second Dynasty of Lagash, the last of which was defeated by his own successor., Ur-Nammu.

The seven years during which Utu-hengal ruled would likely have been spent rebuilding the territories that he had conquered from the damages caused by the Gutian period. From the same tablet which yields the above inscription, we can see that Utu-hengal was referred to by the title “king of the four quarters,” an epithet that was usually reserved for only the most powerful kings. By the use of this title, it is possible to infer that, in his own time, Utu-hengal rose to be a king of substantial power throughout southern Mesopotamia. It is also known that he exercised control over the city of Ur, for it was from that city that Ur-Nammu would revolt against the king.

Ur-Nammu started his career as the *ensi* of Ur under the rule of Utu-hengal. It is also possible that he was Utu-hengal's own son-in-law. In the seventh year of Utu-hengal's reign, he was defeated by Ur-Nammu, and the capital of the Sumerian region was once again moved to Ur, beginning what is known as the Third Dynasty of Ur. Early in his career, the new king of Sumer would go on to defeat the last king of Lagash, Namhani, bringing the second dynastic period of that city to its final end. With the end of the Second Dynasty of Lagash and the Fifth Dynasty of Uruk, regional hegemony transferred to Ur, where Ur-Nammu would found a final great dynasty before the decline of Sumer

began.

Section Six

The Sumerian Renaissance and the Decline of Sumer

Though it would be followed by a period of decline for the city-states of Sumer, the Sumerian Renaissance under the Third Dynasty of Ur would be one of the most remarkable times in Sumerian history. Prosperity and regional power would again be realized as the Gutian rule became a matter of the past, though the Gutians would continue to attack Sumer for much of the rest of its history. From the standpoint of modern historians, this era is also highly important because of the wealth of records that have survived from it. Much of what is now known about Sumer can be directly accredited to scribes in this period copying earlier texts and creating written copies of existing oral history.

Like his other predecessors who had attempted to achieve general hegemony over Sumer, Ur-Nammu's first steps as ruler of Ur were to conquer the other major city-states. Eventually gaining control over

the states of Nippur, Larsa and Adab, Ur-Nammu set out to rebuild Sumer. To this end, he created a new legal code, the earliest that has survived to the current day (though we know of Urukagina's earlier code from other accounts regarding it). As part of his program of re-establishing a cohesive social order in Sumer, Ur-Nammu heavily attached himself to the legacies of Sargon and Naram-sin, who even by that point had taken on a semi-legendary status among the Sumerian population. By styling himself as the legitimate heir to the glories of both pre-Akkadian Sumer and the great rulers of the Akkadian empire, Ur-Nammu ensured that he would command widespread popularity among his subjects, an attitude that can easily be found in many of the surviving texts regarding his rule.

Ur-Nammu also oversaw the building of new canals, gardens and temples, including the great ziggurat of Ur and that of the now ancient but still widely revered city of Eridu. Under him, Sumer was again able to grow and flourish in a relatively stable environment that allowed it to recover from the century of Gutian rule in remarkably short order.

The Sumerian King List records that Ur-Nammu ruled for 18 years. One inscription relating to the end of his reign has been interpreted by scholars to suggest that he may have been killed in battle with Gutian raiders, who were still attacking Sumer periodically well into the Sumerian Renaissance period, though this version of his death is based mostly on speculation. Upon his death, Ur-Nammu would be

succeeded by his son, Shulgi, who would continue the ambitious programs of restoration that had been begun by his father.

Shulgi is thought to have come to power in or around 2094 BCE. Shulgi would build upon his father's successes, building a larger military force capable of both defense of his kingdom and campaigns against other lands early in his reign. This army was first used to attack the remaining Gutian raiders in Sumer, a problem that had plagued the rule of his father and may have led to his own death. This army was also used to expand the influence of Ur, carrying it far into the northern regions of Mesopotamia and to the east in Elam and Anshan. One of Shulgi's holdings in the north, the Semitic city of Assur, would soon become a major city of the Old Assyrian empire. Much like Sargon, Shulgi seems to have preferred a standing army, as opposed to mobilizing inexperienced citizens when threats arose. Militarily, Shulgi was an innovator in his own right, introducing a high degree of troop specialization into the ranks of his military, further improving on the ability of a standing army to respond quickly and effectively to any threats that may have arisen.

Shulgi, however, should not be judged exclusively by his military accomplishments, as he was an innovator in his domestic policies as well. One of his greatest contributions may have been his implementation of a mathematically standardized system of weights and measures in the lands that he controlled. While this may seem quite common to us today, the Sumerian city-states had never had

such a system, and therefore often had their own proprietary measurement systems. While such wide-ranging systems were sufficient to regional powers, they presented a problem to empires into which the many city-states were incorporated. Shulgi's standardized system, therefore, would have been a great boon to trade throughout Sumer, allowing merchants to use a single measurement system, regardless of what city they happened to be in.

Like Ur-Nammu, Shulgi was keen to identify himself in the minds of his subjects with the mythical early kings of the Akkadian empire. To this end, he followed the lead of Naram-Sin in presenting himself as a divine god-king. A cuneiform determinative known as *diĝir* is frequently found in conjunction with Shulgi's name. This symbol, when used in this manner, refers to divinity of the subject. From this, modern historians have found that Shulgi was not deified after his reign, as were many of the earlier kings, but instead presented himself as divine or semi-divine in nature during his own lifetime. This presentation was further enhanced by a mythic run undertaken by Shulgi from the city of Nippur to Ur and then back again in order to preside over a religious rite in both of the cities on the same day. The two cities are separated by roughly 100 miles, making his total one day run a distance of 200 miles. Making it more impressive to his citizens was the account that the run took place during a great storm. Whether or not such a run actually took place is a matter of contention among historians. Evaluation of modern elite athletes has suggested that such a run may have been physically possible.

Historical accounts of another ancient long-distance running tradition, the *Chasquis* messengers of the Inca empire, suggest that these runner routinely ran distances of up to 150 miles per day, nearly rivaling Shugli's legendary run and providing circumstantial evidence that it may not be as far-fetched as it seems on the surface. Whether the event took place or described or not, the story of Shulgi's run between Ur and Nippur firmly secured his legend among his subjects.

Shulgi was also one of the earliest kings who might have been referred to in the parlance of our times as a man of letters. Various accounts record Shulgi's ability and training as a scribe, meaning that he was enrolled in a scribal school at some point in his youth. A praise poem of Shulgi also attests that he was capable of speaking five languages fluently and had studied music to the point that he was able to perform with competence on all of the common instruments of Sumer. While the elements of such praise poems are doubtlessly exaggerated, they do show a regard for Shulgi's intelligence and wisdom, as well as his martial accomplishments.

Shulgi's later reign would be largely defined by conflict with the Amorites, the nomadic tribe that would eventually conquer the small city of Babylon and turn it into one of the great powers of Mesopotamia. Later kings would also face difficulties with the Amorites, who were already beginning to grow in power. Despite this threat, Shulgi's reign continued without any major disasters related to tribal incursions.

According to the *Sumerian King List*, Shulgi reigned for a period of 48 years before, sometime in or around 2047 BCE, being succeeded by his son Amar-Sin. Shulgi's reign had seen the final great flourishing of the world's oldest recorded civilization. His successors would continue to hold Sumer together long after his death, but a gradual decline would eventually lead to the end of Sumer and the rise of the powers of Assyria and Babylon in its place. Amar-Sin, though a competent ruler, would not have the same degree of success that his father had had in expanding the empire. Continued expansion northward would occur under his reign, but the territorial gains would be limited.

One notable occurrence during Amar-Sin's nine year reign was an uprising in Assur. After having suppressed the attempted revolution, Amar-Sin is recorded to have moved an ethnic Akkadian *ensi* named Zariqum into the governorship of the city. Zariqum had been one of Shulgi's *ensis* in the Elamite lands, presiding over the city of Susa, and therefore was accustomed to holding control over non-Sumerian lands under the remote rule of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

When Amar-Sin died in about 2038 BCE, his brother Shu-Sin assumed control of the dynasty. By the time of Shu-Sin's rule, conflict with the Amorites had escalated far beyond the low-level border wars that had been a common occurrence during the later years of the reign of Shulgi. A general rebellion of Amorites that threatened to plunge Sumer into a period analogous to the Gutian wars led Shu-Sin to build

what is sometimes called the Amorite or Amarru wall, a massive fortified wall estimated to have been between 150 and 170 miles in length. Though the wall and the garrisons of soldiers that defended it were intended to keep Amorite forces out of Sumer, the effort would ultimately fail as more and more Amorite groups began to engage in conflict with the Third Dynasty of Ur. Shu-Sin, likely already at an advanced age as he was the brother, rather than the son, of his predecessor and both had lived through the long rule of Shulgi, would die before the Amorite invasions crippled a weakening Sumer and helped to gradually bring about the ultimate end of the Sumerian kingdoms.

The final king of the Third Dynasty of Ur was named Ibbi-Sin, the son of Shu-Sin and the grandson of Shulgi. Following Shu-Sin's nine year reign, Ibbi-Sin is recorded by the *Sumerian King List* to have ruled for a period of 24 years between roughly 2028 and 2004 BCE. His reign would encompass a series of events that, in conjunction, would end his dynasty. The first, and perhaps most influential, dilemma faced by Ibbi-Sin was a drought that severely limited the ability of the Sumerian city-states to grow enough crops to feed their population. This economic disaster was made worse by the continuing Amorite invasions. Amorite raiding parties are thought to have attacked vital irrigation systems, thus further depriving the fields of necessary water.

As the rule of Ibbi-Sin weakened, the *ensis* of the other city-states gradually began to break away from the centralized rule of Ur. Unlike

his early predecessors Ur-Nammu and Shulgi, Ibbi-Sin did not have the partially legendary popularity that could hold the Sumerian cities together through such a time of difficulty. By the end of his reign, Ibbi-Sin is thought to have lost almost all of the territory that had once belonged to the Third Dynasty of Ur, leaving him in control of only the great city itself.

The final event that completed a three-fold perfect storm was an invasion from Elam, one of the oldest rivals of the Sumerians and a foe against which they had fought territorial wars for centuries. The precise conditions under which the Elamites invaded and attacked Ur are not known, though it is entirely possible that the invasion was merely opportunistic, as Sumer had grown weak and divided by the end of Ibbi-Sin's rule. Whatever the case may be, surviving accounts state that the Elamites overran the city of Ur and conquered much of its territory, taking Ibbi-Sin as a captive in the process. Ibbi-Sin is presumed to have remained the prisoner of the Elamites for the rest of his life, but this is not definitive, as he disappears from the historical record after his capture.

With this, the Third Dynasty of Ur, and with it, the great Sumerian Renaissance, ended. Amorite and Elamite invaders were seizing lands that had traditionally been in the exclusive control of the hegemonic ruler of Sumer. The process of decline, however, would not be a swift one, but rather a long fall toward the end of Sumer. Indeed, the *Sumerian King List* itself records one final dynasty of Sumer, and yet

another not mentioned on the list is known.

The first of the aforementioned dynasties was that of Isin, to which kingship of Sumer is said to have been relocated after the fall of Ur. This Dynasty of Isin, which would last for nearly 200 years in one form or another, may technically be called a Sumerian dynasty in only some aspects. Though it displayed much of the earlier culture of the Sumerians, particularly that influenced by the Third Dynasty of Ur, and controlled some of the great city-states and their Sumerian populations, the kings of this dynasty were, in many instances, not Sumerians.

The first king of the Isin Dynasty was a governor named Ishbi-Erra who had first come to power under the reign of Ibbi-Sin before eventually turning on him and establishing himself as a rival king in Isin and seizing Nippur in order to achieve the regional hegemony traditionally associated with the control of that city. Ishbi-Erra himself, though a powerful subordinate of a Sumerian king and a governor of a Sumerian city, is thought to have been Semitic, rather than Sumerian, in origin. A letter from Ibbi-Sin to another regional ruler attests to this, specifically stating that Ibbi-Sin was not Sumerian by birth. The most widely accepted theory of his origin is that he was a displaced Amorite who had come into the service of the kingship in Ur.

After rebelling against Ibbi-Sin, Ishbi-Erra exercised control over

Sumer from Isin, eventually gaining power over Uruk and Ur after having successfully repelled the Elamite forces that had brought about the end of his former king. With this degree of regional power attained, Ishbi-Erra and the remaining kings of Isin would keep something resembling a unified Sumerian kingdom in existence until the rise of Hammurabi some two centuries later.

Ishbi-Erra was followed by his son, Shu-Ilishu, after what the *Sumerian King List* records as a 33 year reign. Shu-Ilishu, it seems, had some designs on becoming a new heir to the legacy of the great kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur. His reign, beginning sometime around 1984 BCE, was marked by new construction projects, particularly in the city of Ur, where he rebuilt the temple of the city's patron deity Nanna and recovered the idol of the temple from the Elamites, who had taken it from the city at the end of the reign of Ibbi-Sin. The rebuilding of Ur would likely have made Shu-Ilishu a popular king among his citizens. However, he would not complement this achievement with new territorial acquisitions, leaving the region controlled by Isin relatively small in comparison to the wide-ranging power enjoyed by earlier dynasties.

The lineage founded by Ishbi-Erra would continue on through his grandson and great-grandson, Iddin-Dagan and Ishme-Dagan, respectively. During this time, the Sumerian kingdom under the rule of Isin would continue to hold together, though fragmentation of the city-states would be an almost continuous problem. An interesting

event would occur somewhat later with regards to the city-state of Larsa, which for much of the early Isin Dynasty was under the control of the kings of Isin. The city, though still very much Sumerian in its character, was ruled by a series of Amorite governors who were appointed by the kings in Isin to administer its day-to-day functioning. Following Ishme-Dagan, a king by the name of Lipit-Ishtar would come to power, and it was during his reign that Isin would lose control of the city-state of Larsa.

Of the rulers of the Isin Dynasty, Lipit-Ishtar is perhaps the most historically prominent. Though his military exploits would not be of the major nature that had made earlier kings famous, he would create a new and impressively comprehensive code of law for the regions over which Isin still held dominion, and thus make his mark on history. Because of the Amorite heritage that both shared and because of certain similarities between them, some scholars have pointed to the Lipit-Ishtar legal code as the inspiration for the code of Hammurabi, which would become the most well-known set of laws of the ancient Near East. While Hammurabi would almost certainly have encountered this earlier code in his conquests of Mesopotamia, it is impossible to say with any certainty how much the code of Lipit-Ishtar directly influenced his own legal mandates.

At some point during the reign of Lipit-Ishtar, the city of Larsa would rebel against Isin, robbing it of one of its most important cities. Gungunum, the Amorite ruler of the city, became a separate king,

establishing a secondary kingdom in the region that would be a competitor to Isin. During Gungunum's reign, he overtook the city of Ur, where surviving accounts record him adding copper and silver statues to the temple of Nanna. Gungunum would undertake many construction projects during his rule as the king of Larsa, including new city walls in Larsa itself and a new city gate in Ur.

While Larsa thrived under Gungunum, the first royal lineage of Isin would be overthrown, with Lipit-Ishtar reigning as its final king. The next king of Isin was named Ur-Ninurta, who seems to have taken power from Lipit-Ishtar when the previous king either died or fell out of power. Ur-Ninurta, however, was of no relation to the royal Amorite family. While it is not possible to know with certainty, Ur-Ninurta may have been a member of the native Sumerian population, rather than an Amorite, as his name is not of Amorite origin (however, as with the Akkadians, there is no reason to think that Semitic Amorites would not have begun to adopt words and names from the Sumerians, making this ethnic identification of Ur-Ninurta entirely circumstantial).

Ur-Ninurta's reign, like much of the remainder of the period between the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the ascension of Hammurabi to power over Mesopotamia, would be defined largely by conflict between the competing dynasties in Larsa and Isin. Under Gungunum's long rule, Larsa would continue to thrive and prosper, while Isin would hold onto the territory it still controlled. Ur-Ninurta appears to

have been a stabilizing figure in Isin, giving it continuity under a new ruler. From a surviving hymn dedicated to the goddess Inanna and dealing specifically with his reign, modern historians can clearly see that he, like many of his predecessors who had ruled parts of Sumer, cultivated a semi-divine status by purporting to have been selected by the gods to take the kingship of Isin.

Following these two kings, a general period of decline set in, a trend that would continue until roughly 1800 BCE when Sumer truly would collapse under the Amorite-ruled Babylonian onslaught. The final king of the dynasty of Larsa who would be autonomous of Babylonian rule was Rim-Sin I. Rim-Sin was a resurgent ruler who, had Babylon not entered into the period of conquest that would lead to the creation of the Babylonian empire, might have re-established a general control over Sumer. Rim-Sin I would eventually be captured by the Babylonians as a prisoner of war after the defeat of Larsa.

In Isin, a roughly contemporary king by the name of Damiq-Ilishu is recorded as the final king of the dynasty. The conflict that had occurred between Larsa, Isin and Babylon over territory would also lead to the fall of Isin. With Hammurabi in control of much of central and southern Mesopotamia and his territorial gains to expand northward during his reign, the history of Sumer may be said to finally end, and the history of Babylon as we know it today truly begins.

By the time of Hammurabi, the Early Dynastic Period and the First Dynasty of Kish were well over a thousand years removed, and the civilization that was Sumer had enjoyed many periods of growth and flourishing, as well as its share of dark ages. The civilization that can be said to have begun recorded history and defined what form an advanced urban society would take gradually receded into the annals of history. However, the influence of Sumer should not be thought of as ending with the conquests of Hammurabi. Indeed, both Babylon and the Assyria would draw heavily from the culture of the Sumerians, to which both had been deeply exposed during their early formative years.

The study of Sumer proves most fascinating because it is the study of how societies form. As we have seen in this summary of the history of Sumer from the Ubaid period to the fall of the Sumerian Renaissance, this society gives historians today an impressively complete view of the development of civilization in Mesopotamia from the early agricultural stage through the development of cities, written language and complex social structures to create something that we today would readily recognize as a human civilization.

Many of the ideas pioneered in Sumer, such as writing, centralized rule, the construction of multi-national empires and the identification of kings with divine entities would go on to propagate themselves over and over again in the history of man. In some cases, this would take place because of the direct influence of Sumer, while in others it

would merely be a case of parallel societal evolution toward the same ideas. Sumer, its ideas, its traditions and even some of its kings would go on to have long-lasting legacies and wide-ranging impacts on the ancient world. While the history of Sumer and its people may have been over, the legacy of the Sumerians would continue on.

Section Seven

The Sumerian City-states

A reading of the preceding history of Sumer makes it clear that this history is, in fact, a composite of the histories of the various city-states that comprised Sumer. Because of this, no general history of the Sumerians can truly be complete without a more thorough exploration of these states. Following are brief descriptions of the major city-states occupied by the Sumerians during their long history.

Eridu

Quite possibly the oldest known city in the entire world (though there are several other contenders), Eridu was a city held to be sacred

and of great importance by the ancient Sumerians. In the *Sumerian King List*, an antediluvian section describing a series of almost certainly mythical god-kings places the seat of the first two of these rulers in this incredibly ancient city. These kings, Alulim and Alagar, are said to have reigned for a combined period of 64,800 years before the kingship was moved to Bad-Tibira, another ancient city of Sumer.

Eridu was considered holy for its close association with the god Enki, whose temple was central to the city. In fact, the temple at Eridu predates dynastic Sumerian history, as the oldest raised platform (possibly an early prototype of what would become the raised ziggurats typical of later Sumerian temples) goes back to the Ubaid period of Mesopotamian history. Later rulers would frequently make additions to or improvements on the temple in Eridu, eventually raising a true ziggurat on the site.

At the time of its construction, Eridu is thought to have been a port city which sat on the banks of what is today the Persian Gulf. Changes in climate, rainfall and sedimentation have moved the gulf far away from the city in the past several thousand years. Following a marked expansion during the Ubaid period, during which it may have been one of the largest of the earliest cities, Eridu went into a long decline. Later, dynastic kings of Sumer would revive it as a place of worship.

The city itself was discovered in 1855 during excavations conducted by John Taylor, a British archaeologist who had previously conducted

excavations at the city of Ur. Later archaeological teams would build on his work and piece together the age and importance of the city, as well as create a more detailed description of the different temple levels that had existed there as part of their chronology.

In more recent years, more cuneiform tablets and texts have been found at the site, which is still a point of periodic research. In all, seven mounds have been found and excavated, and the site is now known to have been occupied long after the fall of the Sumerian kingdoms, possibly as late as 600 BCE. Excavations at Eridu, as with almost all other sites in Iraq, were almost entirely halted following the toppling of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, when many sites and even museums became subject to looting in the ensuing chaos. In 2006, a team of Italian archaeologists, reportedly working without official permission, claimed to have discovered a cache of cuneiform tablets dating from the later part of the Early Dynastic period, a time at which Eridu is not generally thought to have been of significant importance in the region. Since then, excavations at sites throughout southern Iraq have begun again, and another Italian dig is scheduled to take place at Eridu.

Uruk

A city that remained powerful and important from before dynastic

Sumerian history until the very end of Sumer, Uruk would eventually become one of the longest-inhabited cities of the ancient world. The city, as we have previously discussed, dates back to the early Ubaid period, after which it became the namesake of the following Uruk period during which early Sumerian civilization would begin to develop as distinct from the Ubaid civilization.

During the height of historic Sumer, Uruk would hold hegemony over the region many times, and would become an important asset for almost every king who hoped to do so. Of course, the most famous king of Uruk was, by far, Gilgamesh, who is said to have constructed the first walls around the city during his rule there.

Much like Eridu, Uruk is thought to have been built beside a body of water that, over time, has shifted away from it, in this case being the Euphrates river. The city is divided into two primary central regions, known as the Anu and Eanna districts, with dwellings and other functional buildings in the surrounding areas. The Eanna district is of particular importance because it is thought to have housed the temple of Inanna, which is referred to many times in historical accounts throughout the entire Sumerian period. This district, consisting of monumental buildings, halls and temples, is generally considered to be the younger of the two, though of more archaeological significance with regards to the early history of Uruk, as this is where many of the earliest cuneiform tablets have been found attesting to the invention of this form of writing during the Uruk period. The Anu district, on

the other hand, is far less varied, being dominated by a single temple ziggurat dedicated to the god An. Not unlike Eridu's temple to Enki, the Ziggurat of An developed in many different stages, starting in the late Ubaid period. In the later Uruk period, the ziggurat was built up to a greater height and a new temple, sometimes called the White Temple for its apparent color, was built on top of the higher platform.

Uruk, unlike many of the other city states, would not be abandoned until more than 2,000 years after the eventual collapse of Sumer. Both the Seleucid empire and the Parthian empire would later gain control of the city, maintaining it as an important center in the region for much longer than similar city-states. Uruk's decline and abandonment did not become complete until sometime in the early 7th century AD, giving it a nearly 5,200 year period of continuous habitation.

In 1849, the city was re-discovered by the British archaeologist William Loftus, who conducted excavations at the site throughout the 1850s. Frequent excavations have continued at Uruk for most of the past 150 years, with much work left to do owing to the size and complexity of the ancient city and the length of its history.

Kish

As the first of the city-states to gain hegemony over Sumer in the Early Dynastic Period, as well as the city that would eventually go on

to produce Sargon of Akkad, Kish clearly had a massive impact on Sumerian history. The site is much less ancient than either Eridu or Uruk, and is thought to have been founded sometime in the early Jemdet Nasr period.

Because of its historical significance as the first ruling city of dynastic times, Kish would also become part of a title frequently used by kings who held control over it in order to establish their legitimacy. This title, simply “King of Kish,” was almost analogous to holding influence over Nippur in terms of its ability to legitimize the claim of a king on power over all of Sumer.

Archaeological endeavors at Kish have been perhaps of the poorest quality of all of the city-states. Significant excavations of the city occurred in the decade between 1923 and 1933, when a joint team made up of representatives from both Oxford University and Field Museum of Chicago worked at the site. However, comprehensive reports and findings from these 10 excavation seasons were never compiled nor published, and new digs have failed to build upon the work done by these two institutions. While future digs may create a more comprehensive view of the city and its history, the site currently remains poorly understood in comparison to city-states that have received more archaeological attention.

Geographically speaking, Kish is much farther to the north than many of the most major city-states, which are principally clustered

around the ancient shoreline of the Persian Gulf farther to the south. Babylon lies directly to the west of Kish, with the city of Nippur to the southeast.

Like Uruk, Kish managed to survive as a settled city until the Hellenistic era. Over time, the city seems to have diversified into different areas, as different mounds have yielded artifacts from different eras. The original Sumerian city is thought to have been principally situated under a mound where the ruins of an ancient ziggurat have been found, attesting to its probable Sumerian origin.

Ur

Another of the most powerful among the city-states, Ur is almost certainly the best known Sumerian city. Laying in the far south of Mesopotamia, the city would hold an important place in the power structure of Sumer through almost all of its history. A large part of the reason for this was Ur's importance as a center of trade, as well as its large urban population.

Ur is thought to have originally been a product of the very late Ubaid or very early Uruk period. The city's political power, however, would not truly reach its zenith until very late in the dynastic periods of Sumer, during the Third Dynasty of Ur. Even earlier on, however, archaeological finds confirm the wealth and power of the city.

By far the most impressive and important archaeological find from the Early Dynastic Period of Sumerian history in Ur is the Royal Cemetery of Ur, sometimes alternatively referred to as the Death Pits of Ur. This burial site contained the remains of more than 2,000 individuals, as well as some of the greatest works of Early Dynastic Period Sumerian art found to date. At the site, we see the practice of interring attendants (presumably sacrificed for service in the afterlife) with the principal burial. This, combined with the extreme opulence of the grave goods that accompanied the deceased kings or nobles, of which there are 16, readily leads to the conclusion that the early Sumerians, not unlike the Egyptians, may have believed in an afterlife where worldly goods and provisions would be necessary.

One of the most important artifacts unearthed from the Royal Cemetery of Ur is a piece known as the Standard of Ur. This artifact is a two sided hollow box, with each side showing a different pictorial scene. On one side, which depicts a battle scene, warriors (presumably those of Ur) are shown using chariots, speaking to the importance of these devices in Sumerian warfare by the 26th century BCE, which the rough period that the standard is thought to date from. Much of the background of the Standard of Ur is formed from a precious stone called lapis lazuli. Because this stone is rather rare, being sourced from only a handful of regions in the world, the use of large amounts of it in both the Standard of Ur and other decorative items found in the royal burials at Ur speaks to the wealth and widespread trade of

the city at that time. The lapis lazuli found there is almost certainly from modern-day Afghanistan, which was the primary source of the stone for the ancient world.



Illustration 8: A reconstructed version of the Standard of Ur, one of the most impressive finds from the Royal Cemetery of Ur.

The history of research at Ur is a remarkably long one, going back to the early 17th century, when an Italian explorer and scholar named Pietro Della Valle visited the ancient site while touring the sites of the ancient Near East. Upon his return to Europe, Della Valle brought with him bricks inscribed with cuneiform script, commonly used in ancient Sumer to show that certain important buildings had been ordered and constructed by a particular king. In the 1850s, John Taylor undertook his preliminary excavations at the site, turning up evidence of early Sumerian work done on the great ziggurat. Possibly because of the frequent entanglement of archaeological research with the study of biblical history in Taylor's time, however, his excavations were usually more concerned with the later Babylonian ruins on the site of Ur, which had remained powerful and important well into the Babylonian rule of Mesopotamia. This may hardly be deemed to be a fault in

Taylor or his methods, as his digs predate the decipherment of the Sumerian language, making it impossible for him to establish with certainty that a pre-Babylonian civilization had founded the site. Though some scholars at the time suspected such a civilization's existence, it was far from proven. Despite this, Taylor's work was an important step forward in the research of Sumerian occupation at Ur, and laid the groundwork for later excavations.

The excavations that unearthed the Royal Cemetery were conducted by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, one of the greatest archaeologists of his time and a pioneer of modern methods of excavation focused around careful preservation and recording of all finds. This and later excavations began to create a complete picture of the earlier history of Ur, with a focus on the time of Sumerian occupation rather than the later Babylonian era. Over the past several decades, continued excavations have given modern historians a relatively clear understanding of the history and the dynamics of ancient Ur, particularly during its third dynastic period, when kings such as Ur-Nammu and Shulgi left much behind to be studied in comparison to their earlier counterparts.

Akkad

While it was not a Sumerian city-state, being inhabited by the

Semitic Akkadians, Akkad's impact on the history of Sumer is so significant that it cannot be left out of a list of the important cities of Sumer. The history of this city is quite uncertain, since accounts dealing with the era of Sargon state that it was he who built the city as his capital, but accounts thought to be from an era much earlier than that of Sargon also mention it. Many historians have suggested the possibility that Sargon simply restored and expanded Akkad after moving his capital there from Kish, rather than constructing an entirely new city.

One of the great problems of discussing Akkad in historical context is that the site of the city has never been identified, meaning that all direct historical data dealing with it comes from records, rather than from actual archaeology. This means that most conclusions that can be tentatively drawn about Akkad are classed as informed speculation, rather than empirical fact. What is known is that the city was almost certainly located on a major body of water, probably the Tigris river, as surviving texts from the period of the Akkadian empire mention trade ships from many lands mooring there.

What can be said with certainty, however, is that the city and its kings had an incredible effect on Sumerian history. Sargon of Akkad and his grandson Naram-Sin were perhaps the most famous of kings among the later Sumerians themselves, with many kings of later periods attempting to attach themselves to the legacy of these two emperors. Akkad also had a more general impact on the ancient world

by giving it the language that would go on to become the common diplomatic tongue of the Near East. Akkadian and its dialects would permeate Mesopotamia and fall into universal usage among the Babylonians and Assyrians, as well as more narrow usage by the Hittites and Egyptians when treating with other rulers of the region.

Because the site has not yet been identified, the details of when and how Akkad was abandoned are not known. Sumerian accounts seem to indicate that its fall happened rather abruptly, possibly because of a drought that is thought to have occurred in the region at the time combined with the attacks of the invading Gutians. Later Babylonian texts make passing references to Akkad, but there is debate as to whether or not these references are to the original city itself, or simply the region surrounding it, also called Akkad. Even if Akkad did continue to exist as a functioning city for some time after the collapse of the Akkadian empire, it seems likely that its importance declined drastically, as later Sumerian texts do not address the city specifically.

Lagash

Lagash remains fascinating due to the fact that, despite its great power and importance as a city-state, it is never mentioned in the *Sumerian King List*. Lagash, though less mentioned than the other centers of power in Sumer, was an incredibly important city, both

during the Early Dynastic Period and following the collapse of the Akkadian empire.

Lagash was often in a state of conflict with a rival city-state, Umma. The reason for this conflict is not known definitively, but the fact that the two cities were relatively close to each other may have resulted in a competition for land and resources, and some accounts mention that a dispute over territorial boundaries between the lands of the two states may also have been involved. In most instances, outside of the kingship of Lugalzagesi, the city-state of Lagash seems to have held the position of higher power of the two cities. After its final resurgence during its second dynastic period, it appears that Lagash went into a long and gradual decline. The city itself did survive into the Babylonian era, but never again attained the power or prominence that it had enjoyed under the rule of its Early Dynastic Period kings.

Archaeological research at Lagash begins with excavations conducted by Robert Johann Koldewey, by far more well-known for his work at the ruins of Babylon, in 1887. It was not until the middle of the 20th century, however, that the site would be positively identified as the city of Lagash. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, research continued, eventually leading to the fairly comprehensive knowledge of the city and its history available to us today.

Umma

The aforementioned competitor state to Lagash might have been historically almost inconsequential were it not for the successes of its most prominent king, Lugalzagesi. Though Lugalzagesi would move his capital to the city of Uruk fairly early on, Umma was the city from which he began his conquest of Sumer, giving it a great deal of historical significance.

The site of Umma itself was, for many decades, a matter of understandable confusion. A site which is now generally identified as the smaller city of Kissa was long thought to have been Umma itself. The confusion arose because Kissa was almost continuously dominated by the rulers of Umma and therefore yielded many texts referring to Umma. For some time, there were scholars who believed that Kissa and Umma were one and the same, with Umma being the Sumerian word for the city and Kissa the Akkadian word relating to the same site. Further confusing the matter is the argument, still to be settled, over whether or not Umma was a single city or a region. While many have agreed that the new site generally referred to as Umma, called Umm al-Aqarib, is in fact the city, others still maintain that the word Umma was not any single city but a collective named applied to all of the cities in that given area.

Umma would continue to be an important power in Sumer throughout the years of the Sumerian Renaissance, eventually

declining into abandonment at a time thought to be roughly parallel to the end of the Babylonian period of Mesopotamian history. A large corpus of cuneiform texts uncovered at the site now identified as Umma has revealed that it was an administrative center of some importance during the Third Dynasty of Ur.

In modern times, Umma illustrates one of the most devastating problems of archaeological sites that are not properly maintained and overseen. Following the collapse of the Iraqi government, both of the sites that had been alternately identified as the ruins of Umma fell prey to aggressive looting due to a lack of any central authority or deterring forces to prevent it. While looting of ancient sites has been a serious problem in Iraq, owing to a combination of general poverty and the high prices commanded by Sumerian antiquities when sold to collectors, the looting at Umma was sufficiently severe that full reconstructions of the site may never be possible because of the amount of unrecorded and unsystematic excavation that has taken place.

Nippur

Among the city-states never to have held hegemonic rule over Sumer, Nippur is by far the most important, as it was the city that was generally considered to be the key to establishing that rule. Because of

the temple of the god Enlil that was housed in the city, Nippur was sometimes conquered by ambitious kings, but was rarely subject to the violent destruction that sometimes marked the conquest of other cities.

Nippur would survive the Sumerian collapse and remain as a somewhat less-important city throughout Babylonian history. During the period of the Assyrian control of southern Mesopotamia, however, Nippur would experience a renaissance as a flourishing temple city, with kings eager to contribute to the building and restoration of the temples.

Nippur's long-standing political and religious significance also led to it holding a wealth of documents recording administrative matters. Numerous areas around the city have yielded vast numbers of cuneiform texts that are vital to the understanding of ancient Sumer that we have today, with excavators going so far as to name one section of the site Tablet Hill for the number of texts that have been unearthed there.

Part of the reason for this massive abundance of cuneiform texts in Nippur is that it was the site of a noted scribal school that was probably associated with the temples in the city. In this school, scribes would copy existing documents in order to gain proficiency with the cuneiform writing system. While it may seem strange in our highly literate era, the ability to write was a skill possessed by only a

very few in such early times. As such, scribes held a station of some importance and social standing in Sumerian society.

While some early work was done in the mid-19th century, major excavations of the sacred city of ancient Sumer would not begin until 1889, when the University of Pennsylvania would begin thorough research of the site. This early expedition established beyond the shadow of a doubt that Nippur was a site of great significance, both historically and in terms of the wealth of texts that were recovered from it, including some of the great works of Sumerian literature. The excavation team also found the temple of Enlil, the religious center that had given Nippur much of its importance to the Sumerians. Later digs would continue to unearth new texts and new temples, including a temple to the goddess Inanna, the earliest layers of which go back to the early Jemdet Nasr period. Today, Nippur is still considered one of the key sites in the research that has been conducted to date regarding Sumerian civilization, as the tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets that have been found by various teams of excavators have added vast sums of invaluable information to the knowledge that modern historians have about this ancient society.

Larsa

Like Lagash, Larsa is never credited in the *Sumerian King List* as one

of the centers of rule in Sumer. However, the city was an important administrative center, particularly in the later history of the Sumerian city-states when it became a competing ruling power to the city of Isin. Larsa is often overlooked in Sumerian history because of this comparative lack of importance within the earlier historical power structure of the region.

The exact time of the founding of the city of Larsa is unknown, though it is thought to have occurred prior to the beginning of the Early Dynastic Period. The city remained as a minor power throughout much of Sumerian history before coming into a much higher degree of prominence in the power vacuum that followed the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the rise of Isin. Later, invading Elamites would gain control of the city, installing Elamite kings over the Sumerian and Amorite population.

The city, though it would not remain as the important center of central authority that it became under Gungunum and his successors, would go on to become a city-state of the later Babylonian empire, remaining occupied through the Seleucid period before eventually being abandoned. Remains of these later cultures are heavily superimposed over the ruins of the original Sumerian city at the site, suggesting a high degree of continuity in terms of occupation and construction at Larsa between its various periods.

Archaeological excavations at Larsa have been sparse, but have

returned important finds. One of the most critical finds relevant to the history of the city is a list of the kings of Larsa that parallels the *Sumerian King List*, but applies only to the city of Larsa itself in the later Sumerian and early Babylonian periods. It is from this list that most of what we know about the dynastic kings of Larsa is derived.

Eshnunna

Far to the north of most of the rest of the Sumerian city-states is a site that receives little attention in comparison to cities such as Ur, Uruk and Nippur, but which has yielded some very important archaeological finds. This city is known as Eshnunna and is located at the modern site known as Tell Asmar.

Eshnunna was never a major political power, though it did have a certain degree of territorial influence in the areas that surrounded it. What the city-state lacked in political and military importance, however, it more than made up for in its importance as a trading hub of ancient Mesopotamia. The city is thought to have been settled sometime during the Jemdet Nasr period of Sumerian history and would continue on as a regional power in central Mesopotamia until about a century after the reign of Hammurabi.

One of the most important finds from the site at Tell Asmar is a law code specific to the city of Eshnunna. Though these laws are hardly a

comprehensive corpus of legal policies, they do give us yet another example of a Sumerian law code that predates the time of Hammurabi, making it invaluable in reconstructing how laws and legal systems developed in their earliest days. Also found at Eshnunna were the 12 statues known as the Tell Asmar Hoard. These statues depict worshipers paying their devotion to a god, possibly depicted by the largest and most ornate of the statues, though it is not certain that this statue is not meant to show a king or another person of prominence, indicated by the greater size, at worship. The statues are thought to be of Sumerian citizens worshiping the god Abu, to whom a large temple in Eshnunna is dedicated.

Babylon



*Illustration 9: Photograph of ruins
from the 1932 excavation season at
Babylon*

Much like Akkad, this city is not Sumerian, but is included here because of the great impact that it would have on the final days of Sumerian history. Babylon and the empire of which it was the capital would go on to become the successor state to Sumer, showing many similarities with the Akkadian empire that had once interjected itself into the history of the Sumerian city-states.

Babylon is first mentioned during the time of Sargon, when he is said to have excavated and relocated the city, building it anew somewhere close to the city of Akkad itself. Whether this is apocryphal or not is unknown, as the city of Akkad has yet to be found, and no other sites that may represent an earlier site of the city

of Babylon have been identified to date. This early reference to the city and its proximity to Akkad, however, makes it very likely that the original Babylonians may have been of Semitic Akkadian origin.

For some time after its conquest by the Amorites, probably sometime in the 19th century BCE, Amorite Babylon coexisted with the declining Sumerian city-states quite well, though conflict between the Sumerians and the Amorites was still relatively common. The final event that would bring about the end of an already heavily weakened Sumer would be the rise of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, the sixth king of the First Dynasty of Babylon. Under his rule, the Sumerian city-states would be incorporated into the Babylonian empire, finally ending what is traditionally thought of as Sumerian history, even though by this time few of the rulers of the major city-states were, themselves, Sumerians.

Babylon, however, would not simply destroy Sumer. Instead, it would absorb many of the ideas and cultural traditions of it, just as the Akkadians had done several centuries earlier. In Babylonian art, literature, administration and religion, we can see elements of Sumerian society continue well after the end of the Sumerian period of Mesopotamian history. Some of these elements would even be passed on to later cultures, such as the Persians.

Section Eight

The Decipherment of Sumerian Language and the Cuneiform Writing System

Sumer, as we discussed in the introduction to this work, is generally considered important as the first civilization from which we have direct written records from which to reconstruct its history. However, between the end of Sumerian history and the beginning of the age of historical research into Sumer, more than 3,000 years elapsed. This left linguists and historians with the difficulty of deciphering the writing system and language of the Sumerians before their ancient accounts could be read.

The prevalence of cuneiform texts throughout Mesopotamia left no shortage of examples in many different languages for scholars to study. European contact with cuneiform texts goes back as far as a little-documented Venetian traveler whose name has come down through history only as Barbero. Barbero, who visited the city of Shiraz in modern Iran, described what were almost certainly cuneiform inscriptions in both rocks and clay bricks and tablets. Later, Della Valle would bring his own samples back to Europe. However, neither of these two early observers of cuneiform are known to have made any progress in deciphering the characters that they had come

across.

The real work on the slow process of deciphering cuneiform would not begin until the late 18th and early 19th centuries when a work known as the Behistun Inscription piqued the curiosity of Western linguists. By this time, many examples of cuneiform text were known, and scholars were beginning to take serious note of them. The inscription, which was found cut into the cliffs of Mount Behistun in Iran, bore the same text in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite and the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. The text, though it would prove to be the key to beginning to understand cuneiform languages, presented a special problem, as all three of the comparative texts were written in cuneiform.

The first serious progress made toward the understanding of the inscription was the work of a German linguist named G.F Grotefend. Grotefend began by establishing certain patterns in the word frequencies, establishing that one common word probably meant “king”, and that the symbols around that word were likely used to spell out names. He also deduced, quite correctly, that the Old Persian cuneiform script was alphabetical, rather than syllabic or based on whole-word logograms. With this information, he was able to reconstruct a very basic interpretation of a section of the inscription which dealt with known Persian kings. In doing so, Grotefend began the process that would eventually unlock the keys to cuneiform and its original language, Sumerian.

As time went on, other linguists would gradually build on Grotofend's work. By the 1850s, Old Persian and Babylonian had been deciphered to a reasonable degree, allowing scholars to read many of the ancient texts that had come to their attention. However, Sumerian was still to be discovered. Edward Hinks, an Irish scholar and clergyman, was the first to suggest that cuneiform scripts were actually the product of a language that predated Akkadian, largely because of the structure of the writing system, which did not seem to organically conform itself to the Semitic language. When Sumerian texts were first found at the sites of the former city-states in southern Iraq, Hinks was proven correct, and the work on the original cuneiform language could begin in earnest.

In the 1880s, Paul Haupt, who was one of the prominent early pioneers of Assyriology and cuneiform linguistics, succeeded in producing a translation of a Sumerian text that had been found in conjunction with an Akkadian equivalent, laying the groundwork for the lexical and grammatical reconstruction of the Sumerian language. Haupt's resulting work, *Sumerian Family Laws*, was arguably one of the greatest achievements in the history of research into the Sumerians, as it allowed modern historians, for the very first time, to look back into texts that had been written thousands of years before in ancient Sumer. This work, in conjunction with Haupt's *Akkadian and Sumerian Cuneiform Texts*, would become a cornerstone of the early work on the language of the Sumerians.

Work on the reconstruction of Sumerian continued on through the 19th and into the 20th century, spurring on consistent discoveries. In the middle part of the 20th century, a professor of Sumerian linguistics, and arguably one of modern history's foremost authorities on the subject, named Samuel Kramer began his work of reconstructing works of Sumerian literature that were fragmentary and represented in many different tablets and sources, bringing us for the first time some of the great works of Sumerian myth and literature. Kramer's contributions brought together much of what had been learned since the decipherment of Sumerian and the subsequent expansion of the understanding of it into an endeavor that revived some of the most valuable historical texts currently available to us.

Today, a reasonably complete understanding of the Sumerian language, built on more than a century and a half of work by great scholars the world over, allows historians to analyze textual materials from ancient Sumer quite readily. There is, however, still work to be done in this area. Scholarly disagreements about form and structure, as well as the meaning of individual words, are quite common in the study of Sumerian language. The complexity of the language and the fact that it has been reconstructed after 2,000 years of complete disuse and nearly 3,800 years since it was in widespread use as a spoken language, have made reviving it quite difficult. While modern linguists have pieced together what is thought to be functional Sumerian, it should be noted that the reconstruction is not necessarily true to the

original language. As time goes on and more texts are translated and studied, the information about the language and its usage becomes very slowly more thorough and complete.

Section Nine

Sumerian Religion

By the frequent attachment of kings to the concept of divinity, as well as the importance given to the building and rebuilding of temples, we can see that religious belief played a key role in ancient Sumer, and that priests and temples were also a key part of the political power structure, though they were not in direct control in most instances, particularly later on in the dynastic period.

For this reason, it is necessary to understand the primary gods of Sumer. Sumerian religion was heavily polytheistic, with gods representing different natural forces or elements, as well as elements of human interactions. Gods were thought of as highly regional, though they were not confined to specific places inherently. For this reason, city-states had temples to their own city gods. Some prominent examples of this, such as the temple of Enlil that made Nippur so important, have already been discussed. Following are brief

descriptions of some of the major gods within the Sumerian pantheon.

An (sometimes Anu): An was the Sumerian sky god, thought to have been the primordial father god of Sumerian mythology. As the supreme god of the early Sumerian pantheon, An was revered as a distant figure, less involved in the day-to-day lives of humans than some of the gods that would descend from him. However, in the Sumerian understanding of the cosmos and its workings, An was a figure of great importance. He is also said to have been the creator of both spirits and demons, lower levels of spiritual beings that were below gods in the myths of the Sumerians. An's name is synonymous with the heavens in the Sumerian language, and so was used in describing both the deity and his realm.

Enlil: Notable for his temple and mythological former residence at Nippur, Enlil was one of the key gods of the Sumerian pantheon, and was also an important concept with regards to political power structure in Sumer. Aside from vying for control of the city of Nippur, kings who wished to establish themselves as legitimate would frequently invoke the blessings and favor of Enlil. Nowhere is this more prominent than during the reign of Sargon of Akkad, who invoked the favor of many deities in his conquests. In two well-known tablets regarding his reign and military campaigns, Sargon is referred to as “the king whom Enlil permitted no rival,” showing a strong connection between the perceived blessings of Enlil and dominion over Sumer.

Enlil was thought of as the god of winds, which included human breath under his rule. Though An held the position of father god and lord of the Sumerian pantheon, Enlil, at times, seems to have been worshiped as the king of the gods in his own right, possibly representing a religious shift away from the worship of An. Enlil was also said to have been the god of fate, which is why his decree of kingship carried such weight when invoked. Enlil is also occasionally depicted in Sumerian mythology as a destroyer god, particularly in the myths surrounding the fall of the city of Akkad.

Enki: Another of the most powerful gods of the Sumerians, Enki was portrayed as the god of wisdom and magic, as well as the god that created and taught humans in the earliest days. Enki was also a god connected with the many ideas that went into the creation of civilization, particularly the arts and language. Enki was said to inhabit the *Abzu*, a region of water that lay underneath the Earth in the Sumerian view of the cosmos. As such, Enki was also the god of water, making him a key deity in a civilization that was so reliant on the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers for the agricultural activities that allowed it to sustain itself.

Ninurta: Ninurta, a god that would go on to play very important roles in both the Babylonian and Assyrian pantheons after the fall of Sumer, would seem to have been a god of strangely disconnected forces. On one hand, he was a god of the plow and agriculture,

believed to govern the storms and rains that caused the rivers of Sumer to flood and deliver much-needed water to the fields. In a more intermediary sense, Ninurta was seen as a god of the hunt. In these senses, Ninurta was a peaceful god of natural elements.

In his other, much more aggressive role, however, Ninurta was also a Sumerian god of war, granting victories in military endeavors. In the times of the classical Sumerian period, this was a role that was shared with Inanna (see below). However, as the religious beliefs of Mesopotamia changed, Ninurta would gradually grow away from his agricultural roots to become a principally martial deity. The Assyrians, in particular, would go on to portray Ninurta in this manner, attaching his image to their own highly militaristic society. Emblematic of this aspect of Ninurta is his mythological wielding of Sharur, a magical mace that could speak to its owner and fly. Sharur is possibly the earliest example of a legendary weapon, which would become a common theme in other myths throughout history.

Inanna: Sharing the position of the deity of warfare with Ninurta, Inanna was primarily a goddess of love, sex, beauty and fertility. Like Enlil, Inanna was frequently invoked by powerful kings to grant legitimacy to their rule. Sargon is said to have been warned by Inanna of a plot by Ur-Zababa to have him assassinated, and later claimed to have the favor of this goddess. Sargon's daughter, Enheduanna, would go on to compose a famous hymn in praise of Inanna. Other kings would go so far as to claim to be the human consorts of Inanna, giving

them a very direct link to divinity. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh refuses the advances of the goddess, thus incurring her wrath. Shulgi, in particular, was portrayed in literature contemporary to his rule as the lover of the goddess.

Inanna would go on to inspire many of the goddesses of the ancient world, particularly her own Babylonian counterpart Ishtar. To a lesser extent, myths of Inanna influenced those surrounding the goddesses Astarte, a later version of Ishtar, and Hannahannah, the Hurrian mother goddess that would eventually be adopted by the Hittite civilization through their long exposure to Hurrian culture. Because of this spread of her cults of worship in various forms, Inanna's mythology had a broad impact on religion in the ancient Near East to a degree that few other Sumerian gods could claim.

Utu: This Sumerian god demonstrates a significant difference between the Sumerian pantheon and those of other extremely ancient cultures. Utu was the god of the sun, generally a position of great importance in the earliest civilizations, as the sun was usually seen as the source of life and worshiped with great reverence. While Utu is certainly among the major gods of the Sumerian pantheon, he was not afforded the degree of devotion nor the important position that were given to sun gods in many other cultures, where they were frequently the central deities of worship. Not entirely unlike Apollo in Greek mythology, Utu held dominion over more than just the sun, being also the god of law and of truth.

Beyond these gods were a host of other more minor that completed the Sumerian pantheon. However, gods were far from the only mythological beings that incorporated themselves into the mythology of ancient Sumer. Below the individual gods in the hierarchy of the Sumerian heavens were classes of gods in which individuals were not distinct, the Igigi and the Annunaki. Also underneath the individualized gods was a world of monsters, spirits and demons that were not gods, but were of supernatural origin. Among these were the Anzu, a monstrous fire-breathing bird, Dimme, a demon that preyed on women during childbirth and possibly the earliest incarnation of the better-known Babylonian and later Hebrew demon Lilith, and Humbaba, the guardian of the great cedar forests that was slain by Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Thus, the Sumerians had a system of belief in which not only gods, but also sets of supernatural beings beneath them, were organized into a many-tiered hierarchy.

To add to this already intricate belief system, kings were often viewed as divine or semi-divine in their own right. The Akkadian king Naram-Sin, for example, seems to have cultivated belief in his divinity during his own lifetime, a practice that would be employed by other kings in the later Third Dynasty of Ur. Early kings portrayed in the

Sumerian King List, particularly those that come before the flood and the First Dynasty of Kish, were generally thought of to have been divine in origin, with even the list itself beginning with an introduction regarding how “the kinship descended from heaven.” This, coupled with the close ties between the priesthood and the kings, leads to the likely conclusion that, much like in Egypt, a divine right of rule was used by the kings of Sumer to establish themselves in their positions.

The cosmological view put forth by Sumerian religion and myth is just as intricate as the many different levels of gods and semi-divine beings. The world as viewed by the Sumerians was a series of layers of existence that rested both above and below the Earth, which was generally considered to have been a flat disk. Over this disk were the heavens, ruled by An, which were thought to have taken the form of a dome or covering over the Earth. Under the Earth, two more existential layers were to be found. The first below the earth was known as *Kur*, the Sumerian underworld, which would come to be known as *Ersetu* in later Babylonian and Assyrian mythologies. This was considered to be a shadowy place in which the spirits of the dead lived as shades or ghosts called *Gidim*. Following this was *Abzu*, the deep underground region of water which was the realm of Enki.

Sumerian religion and myth, though it is greatly different in its values and details, bears in some instances striking similarities to the later Hebrew myths that were almost certainly inspired by Sumerian

mythology which had survived in the Babylonian and Assyrian cultures. Some prominent examples include the deluge of Sumerian mythology, which closely parallels the biblical flood of Noah, the extreme recorded lengths of early kings and heroes, which correspond roughly to the biblical assertion that humans such as Methuselah lived for centuries longer than a possible human lifespan, and a myth relating to the origin of Sargon of Akkad, in which he was said to have been floated down the Euphrates river in a sealed basket made from rushes by his mother, whereupon he was found and raised by an adoptive family. This latter legend is so similar to the Old Testament myth of Moses that it is difficult to conceive of how the two could have developed independent of each other around a shared theme so uncommon in any other world literature.

Appendices

Appendix A

The Peoples and Lands Surrounding the Sumerians

While the Sumerians were certainly ahead of their time in terms of

their development of civilization, it should not be thought that other organized groups did not surround and interact with them. Indeed, the interplay between these other groups and the Sumerians frequently had profound impacts on Sumer and its history. Following are descriptions of the major groups with which the Sumerians had frequent or major dealings.

Elamites: A long-time rival of the Sumerians, the Elamites were a group centered in parts of modern-day Iran. The Elamite civilization developed along very similar lines to Sumerian society, being one of the very first civilizations to adopt urban living during what is generally known as the Proto-Elamite period, which corresponded roughly to the Jemdet Nasr and first centuries of the Early Dynastic Period in Sumer. The Elamites were also early pioneers of written language, having developed a Proto-Elamite script most likely based on Sumerian cuneiform by the end of the 4th Millennium BCE, a mere few centuries after the earliest version of cuneiform had appeared in Sumer. Later, the Elamites would adopt a more regular cuneiform system based on Akkadian.

Elam would become one of very few consistencies during the course of Sumerian history, as there are very few periods during which the two regions were not in some type of conflict. Based on frequent accounts of land seizures from Elam in Sumerian history, it should appear that the Sumerian kings would seize Elamite territory when possible, but that the territorial acquisitions were temporary at best.

Unlike Sumer, however, Elam would remain a force throughout much of the 2nd millennium BCE, with a Neo-Elamite period that would carry its influence as far into the future as the 6th century BCE.

Hurrians: A group that probably migrated into Mesopotamia sometime in the 3rd millennium BCE, the Hurrians would go on to establish a powerful hold over the regions that they controlled. While their reach was limited in the early days of Sumerian history, their power in the north became gradually greater, until they were able to stand as an autonomous region even during the expansionist phases of the Akkadian empire. It was from the Akkadians that the Hurrians would go on to adopt written language in the form of Akkadian cuneiform. In later centuries, the Hurrians would organize into the powerful Mitanni kingdom, a regional power that would become a rival to the Hittites of Anatolia.

Assyrians: An eastern Semitic people, the Assyrians, in the time of the Sumerian city-states, were of relatively little consequence until later in Sumerian history. While Assyria had begun to take its form as an independent political region by the time of the Akkadian conquest of Sumer, Assyria would not truly come into its own until about 2000 BCE, at which time the Old Assyrian Empire was formed from city-states in northern Mesopotamia that had once been part of the Akkadian empire. As an ethnic group, the Assyrians are a rarity in that their history has continued into the modern era more or less uninterrupted without homogenizing with other populations that

entered the Near East at later times. In ancient times, the Assyrians, much like the Babylonian Amorites, adopted a dialect of Akkadian, as well as its Sumerian-inspired cuneiform writing system, as the unifying language of their region.

Gutians: Despite their incredibly large impact on the Sumerian civilization after the fall of the Akkadian empire, relatively little is known about the Gutian people themselves. Unlike other nomadic groups, such as the Amorites, they appear to have adopted few of the advancements that the Sumerians had made into their own society. Few Sumerian records have been found that attest to the Gutian rule of Sumer, though there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the region, or at least some city-states therein, probably were ruled over by invading Gutians for some time. The use of the term Gutium to designate an area east or northeast of Sumer indicates that they almost certainly came from a region of the Zagros Mountains that was north of what was then Elam.

Sadly, no texts in the Gutian language have ever been identified, leaving us only what traces of their language have been preserved in contemporary Sumerian writings. This has made the identification of this enigmatic group even more difficult, as there is practically no linguistic data for modern scholars to work with in an attempt to determine relation to other ethnic groups. Based on the names that have been recorded in Sumerian sources, Gutian is not generally thought to have been associated with any of the language families

common around it, although some attempt has been made to link it to Old Turkish.

Amorites: Another Semitic group, the Amorites are generally thought to have originated in present-day Syria as a nomadic group that, not entirely unlike the Gutians, staged small-scale incursions into Sumerian territory. The first portrayals of the Amorites in Sumerian texts describe them as barbaric and uncivilized, but by the end of the decline of Sumer, they would not only have become common as kings of Sumer, but they would also absorb much of the older culture. With the advancements of Sumerian civilization and the Akkadian language and writing system, the Amorites would go on to found the first Babylonian dynasty. Even though the history of Sumer is traditionally recounted as ending with the rise of Hammurabi in Babylon, the Amorites had already begun to mix with and rule over the Sumerian population to a significant degree by the time that Hammurabi finally conquered the Sumerian city-states.

Egyptians: While Sumer and Elam were developing in modern-day Iraq and Iran, another of the great powers of the ancient world was developing along similar lines along the banks of the Nile river in northern Africa. Although their direct interactions were few, Egypt and Sumer are thought to have conducted some trade with each other in the earliest days of human civilization. Lapis lazuli finds in Egypt are some of the best evidence for this early trade. As previously stated, this precious stone is found in few places that would have been

available to the ancient world, meaning that its presence can be used to gain a rough estimation of trade routes. In this case, a route that passed through Mesopotamia from modern Afghanistan and through to Egypt would be a likely explanation for the presence of the stone in ancient Egyptian finds.

Egyptian civilization may have borrowed some ideas from Mesopotamia as well. While some have pointed to similarities between the earliest pyramids and Sumerian ziggurats, this connection is tenuous at best, as we can see an organic evolution of pyramids from the earlier tomb structures known as mastabas, and the function of the two structures is entirely different. Other shared ideas, however, may have a deeper connection. The Egyptian sickle-sword, or *khopesh*, for example, is first portrayed in a Sumerian stele showing it being wielded by Eannatum, a king of the First Dynasty of Lagash, indicating that the idea for the sickle-sword may have originated in Mesopotamia, although it is possible that the two evolved along similar lines independently.

Meluhha: Though not positively identified, a land called Meluhha in many of the Sumerian texts is generally thought to have been the Indus Valley civilization of India. Whether or not this specific name was applied to this region or used in reference to another, there is certainly much evidence that India and Mesopotamia conducted extensive trade in remote antiquity.

Magan: Most likely modern-day Oman, Magan was primarily a source of a black statuary stone favored by Sumerian sculptors, particularly during the Sumerian Renaissance. This stone, diorite, is recorded in at least one account to have been transported by ship to Sumer after having been quarried from mountains to the south. Because of the extreme hardness of the stone, diorite was only used in the most important pieces of artwork and records. However, the same hardness that made it difficult to work also allows that which is carved onto it to last for extremely long periods of time. Thus, the diorite artifacts from the Sumerian city-states, presumably supplied mostly if not exclusively from Magan, account for some of the best-preserved artifacts from ancient Sumer.

Appendix B

Select Words from the Sumerian Language

Linguistically, Sumerian is a fascinating language, both for being the oldest language for which contemporary written sources exist and because of its seeming lack of relation to any other known language or group of languages. Following is a short list of selected words from the modern reconstruction of the Sumerian language with descriptions of their English equivalent meanings.

Agal- A word referring to floods or overflowing water. Such floods were important for irrigation of fields in Sumer.

Na: A person or human.

Ninda: The Sumerian word for bread. This word would become a nearly universal loanword in languages that adopted the cuneiform writing system, even being added into the Indo-European Hittite language by transference through Akkadian.

Taltal: A word that can refer to intelligence or wisdom in a specific area. Several other words in Sumerian refer to the same concept, and at times can be used interchangeably.

A- The Sumerian word for water. Compounds involving this word are used to convey many different meanings in Sumerian (see *agal* above as an example).

Kurgal- This word literally translates as “the great land” from Sumerian, significant as the word which was generally applied by the Sumerians to their own land and surroundings.

Gudibir- The Sumerian word for war, broadly applied to most forms of military conflict.

Harran- This word was borrowed early on from ancient Akkadian, and is used to designate a road or pathway.

Nanna- This word could be used to refer to both the moon as an astronomical object, or to the Moon god of the same name.

Kur- The Sumerian word for mountain, usually applied specifically to the Zagros Mountain range. This word could also be applied to the Sumerian underworld.

Dingir- The Sumerian word for god or gods. This was used for referring to gods in an abstract sense, rather than by individual or specific names. The cuneiform symbol for this word is also applied to show divinity of a certain subject in texts.

Mul- This word is thought to have literally meant “shine” or “to shine.” However, the word could be applied to many different concepts, as it could mean star, arrow or anything which radiated or shone. Meaning is derived primarily from context.

Burbalag- This word refers to a musician. Whether or not it refers to a player of any specific instrument is not currently known.

Eduru- A village or small community, as distinct from larger cities.

Gir- The Sumerian word for a scorpion.

Lumumun- A priest. This word was primarily in usage during the Sumerian Renaissance, replacing more archaic forms.

Illar Known to refer to a projectile weapon of some variety, most likely a bow, but possibly a throwing weapon of some kind.

Tur- This word refers to illness or disease. Phonetically similar words exist in the language but are conveyed with different cuneiform symbols and have completely different meanings.

Appendix C

Sumerian Mathematics

For the many contributions made to the development of civilization by the Sumerians, one of the largest and most lasting was their contribution to mathematics. Indeed, some of the earliest concepts of Sumerian mathematics are still evident in our modern mathematical systems.

Mathematically speaking, the Sumerians used what is known as a sexagesimal, or base 60, numbering system. For reference, our modern

system is called decimal, or base 10. In our system, a digit's place in a number determines whether it is multiplied by 1, 10, 100, 1,000 and so on. In the Sumerian numbering system, this same principle of places was used, making it the earliest mathematical system known to have made use of place values. In the Sumerian sexagesimal system, however, the place values were not multiples of 10, but of 60. Thus, a number would be multiplied by 1, 60, 3600 and so on from there.

Built into this numbering system was the basis of our own decimal system. The Sumerian numbering system had only two symbols. These were a downward facing cuneiform wedge shape, denoting the number 1, and a left-pointing wedge shape, denoting the number 10. Below is an example, showing the number 13 as written in this system. This is largely recognizable to anyone used to a decimal system, as the symbol for 10 precedes the three symbols for 1, giving us a standard 13. This same system was used to write all numbers from 1 to 59.



From here, however, it becomes somewhat less familiar and takes on the attributes of a sexagesimal system, even though the decimal principle is still in play

to make up the numbers less than 60. In the next example, two 1s have been added to the previous example, denoting the number 2 in the second, or 60, place. This means that the 2 is multiplied by 60 to come up with 120, then added to the 13 for a total of 133.



While seemingly difficult at first, this system offers some mathematical advantages to other numbering systems. To begin with, it is incredibly simple, consisting of only two numerical symbols. It is also vastly superior for showing large numbers, as there were very few instances in which there would be any need to go above the third place value, which represented 3,600.

The sexagesimal system pioneered by the Sumerians is also responsible for some of the mathematical concepts that we still use today. A prominent example of this is our method of dividing circles into 360 degrees, from which each degree is then divided into 60 minutes, further subdivided into 60 seconds. Our time system, with 60 seconds to a minute and 60 minutes to an hour is another example of a Sumerian mathematical concept that has remained relevant into the modern era.

Appendix D

Short Bibliography of Recommended Further Reading

After reading this short history and summary of the Sumerians, there will doubtlessly be readers who will wish to learn more about this remarkable civilization. For these readers, the following works are highly recommended as excellent sources of information regarding the world's oldest recorded civilization.

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Conclusion and a Brief Word from the Author

Thank you for reading *The Sumerians: History's First Recorded Civilization*. I sincerely hope that you have found it as enlightening and enjoyable to read as I did to research and write. I also hope that it will inspire you to learn more about this truly incredible society and give you a solid framework upon which to build in your future learning. The Sumerians, though the earliest civilization in recorded history, were a remarkable people who created a highly advanced civilization, many of the ideas of which have stayed with us to this very day. The history of Sumer is, in a sense, the history of all us, as it was the Sumerians that first began the process of complex

urbanization that would eventually lead humans to achieve all that we have in the past 5,000 years. While every period of history is both interesting and important, I must admit a certain degree of personal bias in thinking of Sumer and its history as the most incredible of all.

If you have enjoyed and learned from this work, you may also find value in a related work of mine, titled *The Hittites: The Lost Empire of the Ancient World*. Much like the book you have just read, it is a short history available on Amazon's Kindle platform. Should you be interested in it, you'll find a link to it below:

[The Hittites: The Lost Empire of the Ancient World](#)

I also plan to release many more works dealing with ancient and medieval history in the future. Like those I have already created, I plan to make my future works easily understood and economical short histories that may be easily approached by any reader, even without a large background in the subject. If you would like to receive updates as future works are released, you can visit my Amazon Author page and click the “follow” button to be informed by Amazon when my future writings come out. For those of you concerned with information privacy, no access to any information is granted to myself or any other third party, you will receive updates and notifications exclusively from Amazon. The link below will take you to the page:

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Finally, if you can be troubled to take the time and are so inclined, I would appreciate any honest review of this work. My goal in writing these short histories is to provide high-quality and high value books for the information of any reader interested in history at the most reasonable possible price. As such, I greatly appreciate honest reader feedback, as it allows me to find out what those who engage with my books do and do not enjoy in them. If you are willing to return to the page from which you downloaded this book and leave a review of your thoughts on it, your feedback will be appreciated and used to improve my future historical works.

Again, I would like to thank you for having read *The Sumerians: History's First Recorded Civilization*, and I hope that you have found the information contained herein to be both interesting and informative.

Best Regards,

Duncan Ryan

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